

WHEN SOMEONE SHOWS YOU WHO THEY ARE...  
BELIEVE THEM THE FIRST TIME...

# THE DEAD CALL

J M DALGLIESH

THE NEW TOM JANSSEN THRILLER

# THE DEAD CALL

---

## HIDDEN NORFOLK - BOOK 6

J M DALGLIESH



# CONTENTS

[Exclusive Offer](#)  
[The Dead Call](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[FREE Book Giveaway](#)

[Are you able to help?](#)

[Kill Them Cold - Preview](#)

[Also by the author](#)

[Audiobooks](#)

**First published by Hamilton Press in 2020**

Copyright © J M Dalglish, 2020

The right of J M Dalglish to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a purely fictitious manner. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

## EXCLUSIVE OFFER

Look out for the link at the end of this book or visit my website at **[www.jmdalgliesh.com](http://www.jmdalgliesh.com)** to sign up to my no-spam VIP Club and receive a FREE Hidden Norfolk novella plus news and previews of forthcoming works.

Never miss a new release.

---

No spam, ever, guaranteed. You can unsubscribe at any time.



## THE DEAD CALL

## PROLOGUE

TAKING CARE ON THE BOARDWALK, still wet and slippery from the morning's storm, sheltered as it was under the canopy of pine, she gingerly made her way towards the wetlands. This close to the sea, the dunes were often reshaped by strong winds and tidal surges. The path was heaven sent both to help visitors traverse the coastal trail as well as to keep the damage to the nature reserve's fragile ecosystem at a minimum.

The cold breeze tore through her that morning; the day starting dull and overcast with a chill to the damp and foggy air, so much so she'd not bothered to check the afternoon forecast. As it turned out the storm front skirted by them, sparing The Wash and the north coast making landfall further south. The grey and threatening skies were replaced by blazing sun, not unheard of so early in June but nonetheless a pleasant surprise. She'd dressed for the cold again though, and as the twilight faded with the setting sun, she felt uncomfortable having spent much of the afternoon sweating in her waxed jacket and boots.

Clear of the pine trees, she entered the dunes now. Here the boardwalk was dry underfoot, which came as a relief. There were areas needing to be replaced where a process of make-do and mend was no longer sufficient. She would need to press hard to ensure this happened before footfall massively increased, as it always did when the summer season properly got underway. For now, at least, she knew where to take care and where she need not concern herself.

She was alone now, the few birders she'd come across in the hides having already packed up for the day. There had been a larger turnout than she'd anticipated, possibly resulting from the expected storm. There was

always the chance to catch the last waves of spring's migratory birds stopping off to take shelter on the coast, but that was perhaps a little optimistic at this point in the season. When conditions were right, you could catch sight of scarce migrants, possibly in numbers, but judging by the aura of anti-climax shrouding the birdwatchers as they left, today wasn't one of those days. Unsurprising. Hopefully, they weren't too disappointed with having to settle for the nesting avocets instead, far from endangered but no less wonderful to see.

Maybe they'd been drawn out by the talk of the stone curlews? Facing a steep decline in numbers, and seldom seen this far north, they were largely limited to the marshland and lakes of the Brecks spanning Norfolk and Suffolk. If it was true, however, that they had been seen then she needed to be out here. It was possible. The short vegetation, open space and sandy soil was suitable for their ground nests, meaning it was plausible, if unlikely, that they were here. Word spread fast amongst the community and the temptation would nag at the usual suspects who would undoubtedly fail to resist their urges.

*Pitiful fines and a harsh telling off. Pathetic.*

Passing the next hide, she found it empty. The boardwalk rose from here to one of the high points where she could scan the dunes in either direction for as far as she could see. Raising her binoculars, hanging from the strap around her neck, she muttered a curse as a familiar pain stabbed at her right shoulder causing her to take pause and draw breath. These moments were becoming more frequent now, lingering for some time rather than passing quickly as they once did. She'd learned to cope, to manage, but the vigour she brought to the battle was waning as time passed.

Lifting the binoculars again, she slowly scanned the dunes in a sweeping motion from the beach towards the wetland marshes. No one was visible, not even a solitary dog walker. The car parks around the visitor centre were empty, but they would be cleverer than that. They knew she regularly noted down vehicle number plates. She knew who owned which car anyway, so they would never park where they could be easily spotted. It would give them away. No, they would park in the nearby town and walk out as if rambling like any other. It was the lingerers who needed watching, those waiting for a moment to slip off the path and beat the bushes in the hope of putting up whatever was nesting.

*Not this night. Not if I have anything to do with it.*

Another surge of pain, this time in her chest, which was an alarming development. Reaching out with her left hand, she braced herself against a fence post, doubling over. Allowing the binoculars to swing free, she clutched her chest with her right hand and sought to catch her breath. It didn't come easily. Each inhalation was forced and came with a rasping exhale. It was no use. She was done for the day.

The moment passed and, despite feeling dizzy, she began the walk back towards the centre where the car was parked. By the time she reached the pine trees separating the dunes from the centre, she felt much better. Within the shadow of the trees it was dark now. The waves crashed nearby, the taste of salt carrying to her on the breeze. Approaching the gate, she stopped. Several shadows moved in the gloom in front of her, barring her way. Something unnatural, unexpected. Taking the head torch from her pocket, she turned it on and angled the white light along the path ahead of her. They weren't here when she passed before. Anger flared within, tinged with fear, but she quelled it, ensuring the watcher wouldn't see. She couldn't allow them the pleasure.

Turning the beam to either side of the path, she scanned the trees and brush, seeking who or what she didn't know and silently praying she wouldn't see anyone. The beam was cut out by the birds, all five of them decapitated and hanging by their feet from wire tied to branches overhead, swaying gently back and forth in the breeze.

"Do you think this frightens me?"

Only the breakers on the shoreline and the breeze passing through the canopy overhead broke the silence. She raised her voice, shouting now.

"This doesn't scare me!" she called, hearing the edge of panic in her tone, angering her further. "I'll not stop!"

Movement above saw her start, glancing up to see something pass through the beam of the torch. It was probably an owl. On another night, she'd be delighted.

*Not this night.*

Taking a half-step backwards, she almost stumbled on a fallen branch. She had to leave as quickly as possible. Sidestepping the display left for her, she found her gaze lingering on it as she hurried past. The white light cast by the torch in her hands gave the scene an ethereal glow, fuelling her growing anxiety as she eyed the birds side by side, noting they'd also been crudely gutted. Both the heads and entrails lay on the path at her feet.

Turning her back she hurried to the gate, struggling to open it despite the latch being unsecured. The path down to the centre, itself locked up and in darkness, was well laid and the safety of her car was only a few steps away. Reaching it, she fumbled with her keys, dropping them on the floor. Kneeling, she rummaged around blindly for them with one hand whilst casting the beam of light back towards the path in case anyone should appear. Not that she would know what to do if they did. Her fingers curled around the fob and she unlocked the car, clambering in and slamming the door shut before pressing the button to deadlock the doors. Only now did she feel safe.

With difficulty, her fingers trembling, she slotted the key into the ignition and started the car. Casting aside the torch, she turned on the headlights, which illuminated where she'd just come from. The beams penetrated deep into the gloom of the pine trees. The silhouette of a figure appeared, its features masked by a hood and a thick overcoat. The dead birds provided a macabre backdrop.

She thrust the car into gear, forgetting to depress the clutch. An awful grinding sound followed, and the car lurched forward as the engine stalled. She turned the key again, pressing the accelerator repeatedly, but the engine merely turned over and over, failing to start. Casting an eye back to the gate, the figure was gone. Somehow that fuelled her borderline panic even more. The engine burst into life and she pulled away. Her phone rang, connected through the car speakers, and she accepted the call, relieved to hear another voice.

"Hello," she said, looking behind her through her mirrors as she left the visitors' centre. Nothing moved.

"I see you, Mary."

"Who is this?" she asked fearfully, glancing at the display registering an unknown caller.

"Wherever you go, Mary... I see you," the voice repeated. It sounded throaty, brusque and terrifying.

"Leave me alone!"

The caller laughed. A slow, soft melodic sound.

"I see you."

## CHAPTER ONE

---

TOM JANSSEN LOWERED THE VISOR, shielding his eyes from the sun sitting low in the sky. Adjusting the dial on the blowers, he increased the flow of cool air. What a remarkable difference a few hours can make. On his way into the station this morning he'd had the heating on and now it was the air conditioning: from overcast and threatening rain to uncomfortable heat in the space of a shift. It was not quite four seasons in one day, but Norfolk was trying its best.

Pulling into the driveway of Alice's house, he parked alongside her car and got out. It was a little strange that he still thought of it as her house; it had been his home for the better part of six months as their relationship deepened following the rubber stamping of his divorce. It wasn't a conscious thing, more incremental. Whereas he'd stayed over two, maybe three, nights in a week previously, he was now a part of the fixtures and fittings. It made sense. The boat was no place for a child, at least not to live on. Fun for a visit or a day trip. On those occasions it was just fine, but unsuitable for a family of three for anything beyond that. The house was still Alice's in his mind. Alice and Saffy's.

Would he ever feel differently? Would it ever be home for him?

Brushing the thought aside, he got out of the car. He was surprised not to see Saffy at the window. Whenever she heard his car pull up on the gravel outside, she would usually appear to acknowledge him, greeting his arrival with a broad smile, minus the front teeth these days, and an enthusiastic wave. Saffy had just turned eight and was arguably going on twelve, but she still had her childish exuberance, the spark that set her aside from the other children he knew. His pride in her couldn't be greater, even if

things were different and she was his own daughter. Aside from the days where he came back after bedtime, she never missed his arrival. Even when he slotted the key into the front door, he still cast a glance to the lounge window half expecting her to be watching him.

Inside, he was greeted by silence. Taking his coat, hanging across his forearm, he looped it over one of the pegs at the foot of the stairs and headed for the kitchen. Hearing the patter of clawed paws on the wooden floor as he approached, he was met in the doorway of the kitchen by Russell. The terrier stopped short of him, leaning back and stretching out his front paws accompanied by a yawn. Tom's arrival must have woken him from his slumber in the dining room. The dog was a recent addition to their hybrid family. Previously belonging to a figure in a recent case, a man who knew he would soon be serving time in prison, to whom Tom had made a promise to find the dog a home. Only, as he was to learn from the rescue centre, there wouldn't be a great deal of interest in a terrier of unknown mixed breeding who was unused to being around people, and particularly families with young children. And these were the people most likely to adopt a rescue dog.

As it turned out, Russell, as he came to be known to them, was very good with Saffy. The two of them took to one another almost immediately and, were Alice and Tom to allow it, both would happily have the dog sleep in the little girl's bedroom, if not on her bed. Ultimately, the thought of separating the two of them was summarily dismissed within a few days and they had to find ways not only to manage their conflicting shift patterns and childcare, but also see to the needs of their new addition.

Tom lowered himself onto his haunches and Russell lifted his front legs onto his knee and extended his head for a welcome scratch behind his unusually long ears: yet another sign that he wasn't your everyday Jack Russell.

"How are you, little man?"

The dog readily accepted the attention, leaning his head into Tom's hand until the novelty wore off and he dropped down, returning to his bed on the far side of the room.

"Any idea where the ladies are?" Tom asked as Russell dropped his chin to the cushion, still keeping his eyes trained on him just in case he should alter direction and head for the fridge.

The crockery from breakfast was stacked up on the worktop alongside the sink, waiting to be loaded into the dishwasher. Alice's everyday shoulder bag was sitting on a chair in the dining room, her car keys on the table. Tom placed his mobile, keys and wallet on the breakfast bar before retreating from the kitchen into the hall. Making his way upstairs, he crossed the landing to their bedroom. The sound of running water ceased as the shower switched off and the sliding doors rumbled open. Crossing to the front window, he put his hands in his pockets and looked out over the farmland towards the coast.

Alice stepped out into the bedroom, startled by his presence.

"Sorry. I thought you would have heard me come in."

"I didn't realise the time," she said, glancing at the clock on their bedside table before tilting her head to one side and using a towel to dry her hair.

"Where's Saffy?"

"At Mum's." Alice tossed the towel to the bed and moved to the vanity table, picking up a large-tooth comb.

She seemed aloof, distracted perhaps. Far more so than usual. He walked towards her, planning to give her a hug despite the probability of getting wet. Putting a hand on the small of her back, she turned to him and briefly smiled. He leaned in and she met his lips with hers, pulling away after the briefest contact and addressing her reflection in the mirror as she drew the comb through her shoulder length hair, grimacing as the teeth caught in the knots.

"Rough day?" he asked.

"Oh... not too bad. Irritating more than anything else."

Alice's role in the Cromer and District Hospital was challenging. At first, she'd moved from working at the local medical centre back into the hospital to ease financial pressures, but these days her commitment and dedication were recognised with two successive promotions. He was pleased for her, knowing as he did how much satisfaction she derived from her job. What had been a necessity had flourished into a career, and he recognised the positive impact on both her confidence and personal self-esteem. The downside, if there was one, was they were seeing less of one another. Had he remained living on the boat, they'd likely see each other only a couple of times in a week at best.



"You?" she asked, without breaking the gaze on her own reflection, still struggling with the entangled knots in her hair.

"Drowning in paperwork."

He didn't really want to speak about it. Glancing at his watch, he saw her glance in his direction.

"I'll get dressed and then I'll have to go and pick up Saffy."

"She's not stopping there for dinner?"

"No. Mum's going out." Alice shook her head. "And I'm running late."

"What do you want to do about dinner?"

She sighed, shooting him a dark look which took him aback.

"Just a question. I didn't know if you had plans already. I'll make a start on it while you're out, if you like."

Alice set aside the comb, frowning at herself in the mirror before turning to him. She stepped across and took both lapels of his blazer in hand, pulling him towards her. She kissed him again, on her tiptoes, only this time with more determination. Pivoting back onto her heels, she smiled.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped. You're right. It's been a rough day and... I don't know," she said, frowning. "It feels like I've been treading water and I'm tired, you know."

"Not a problem. What do you fancy for dinner or should I surprise you?"

"Not after last time, no," she said, patting his chest with the palms of her hands before moving to the wardrobe and selecting her clothes.

"Hey, that was a perfectly good execution of the recipe."

"A perfectly good execution of a *terrible* recipe," Alice corrected him.

Tom held his hands up in supplication.

"I'll accept that. This time I'll stick to tried and tested. How's that?"

"In that case, you should crack on," Alice said, producing a flowery dress on a hanger from the wardrobe. Holding it up in front of her, she looked in the full-length mirror. "Do you think I can pull this off?"

Tom came to stand behind her, looping his arms around her waist. She smiled.

"I think it will look great."

"It didn't fit me very well last summer."

"Dry cleaners must have shrunk it," Tom said, leaning in and kissing her neck.

The stubble on his cheek must have tickled her because she put her head down towards her shoulder to force him away.

"You know very well, Detective Inspector Janssen," she said, turning to face him and putting the dress between them, "that I don't use the dry cleaners."

He pulled her closer to him and she didn't resist.

"This weird weather we've been having must have shrunk it then."

"In the wardrobe?"

"Strange things happen here in Norfolk, you know?" he said playfully. "I'm a detective. I investigate such things. How late are you?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Too late for that," she said pushing him back. He released his grip.

"You can't blame a guy for trying."

"Seriously, do you think this is okay? You know what my mother's like."

"You're slimmer than she is."

"That doesn't stop her pointing out my flaws."

Tom understood Alice's dilemma. The woman wasn't mean spirited, at least not intentionally. Alice's mother was a decent person, very supportive and helpful when it came to Saffy. However, she suffered from a distinct lack of self-awareness. The odd remark that might be judged nonchalant or made in passing could, in reality, cut deep. If she intended to be hurtful, then she would be a nasty piece of work. Remarks made unintentionally, however, could be dismissed as unfortunate or misguided, although, in Tom's mind, it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between the two when it came to Alice's mother. It was an occurrence that seemed to happen with alarming regularity. He decided that discretion was the better part of valour in this conversation.

"I'll get dinner started," he said.

"So, I'm on my own with this one?"

Russell appeared in the doorway, his head cocked to one side. He must have heard the discussion around dinner. Tom glanced at him and he barked, indicating urgency.

"I think someone might need to go out," Tom said, stepping away from Alice. "I'll see you downstairs."

He took a step towards the door and the dog perked up, excitedly shifting his weight between his paws and tentatively bouncing towards the

stairs, but reluctant to head off unless sure Tom was following. Once out on the landing, Russell charged down the stairs, almost losing his footing, the barking growing in intensity. He definitely needed to go outside.

Tom hurried to the back door, turning the key and letting the dog out. He was pawing at the door as Tom opened it, almost hitting the animal in the head as he pulled the door open. Tom shook his head as Russell disappeared into the undergrowth of the garden. The thought occurred that he might return with a baby rabbit in his mouth, or worse, like the last time, a dead rat.

Tom's mobile vibrated on the table and he pushed the door to, leaving it ajar for when Russell returned, thereby avoiding the scratching at the door and any further damage to the wood. It was a bit late, though. Picking up the phone, he saw it was DC Eric Collet.

"Eric, what's up?" he said, glancing at the time. He'd only clocked off less than an hour ago.

"Hi, Tom. That suspicious death over at Blakeney uniform wanted us to take a look at?"

The wind was battering Eric, who was raising his voice to compensate. Gulls called out to one another in the background.

"Yes, what about it?"

"I think you're going to want to have a look yourself."

Tom sighed, turning just as Alice entered the kitchen, a pair of strappy shoes in her hands. The disappointed look on her face must be mirroring his own.

"Okay. Where are you?"

"Blakeney Point."

Tom glanced at the clock again. "I'll be with you as soon as I can."

He hung up, taking a deep breath and turning to Alice, who stood with her lips pursed.

"Duty calls?"

He nodded. "Yes. I'm sorry."

She raised her eyebrows and sighed.

"I'll knock up a quick pasta sauce before I go, if you like?"

"No, there's no need. I'll heat up some leftovers from the fridge. It'll be fine," she said.

He couldn't help thinking the reality was somewhat different.

"I'll call you later. Let you know what's going on."

"Okay," she said, folding her arms across her midriff.

He scooped up his keys and wallet. The dog re-entered the kitchen behind him, thankfully without a carcass in his mouth. He stopped, eyeing the two of them inquisitively. Alice stepped to one side to allow him to pass, and he leaned in to kiss her goodbye. She angled her face so he could kiss her cheek. He pretended not to notice the slight.

"I'll see you later," he said and she nodded.

Closing the front door behind him, he realised he should have complimented Alice on her dress. She looked great. He considered ducking his head back inside and saying so, but thought better of it. The moment had passed and it would look like he was manipulating the exchange as an afterthought. He'd have to do better next time. Unlocking the car, his thoughts turned to what he was going to find out at Blakeney Point.

## CHAPTER TWO

---

TOM JANSSEN FOLLOWED the coast road skirting Blakeney and heading onto Cley next the Sea. The iconic local landmark of the windmill stood proudly visible, and Tom knew the turning would be on his left as he approached the town's outer limits. The wetlands of the nature reserve were off to one side, a carefully-managed location both in terms of protecting the wildlife living in the salt marsh and also diverting tidal waters away from residential properties. Taking the turn, he headed along the road linking the sea front to the coast road, winding its way through the reed beds. A handful of people were visible above, walking through the salt marsh by way of one of the many raised pathways used by walkers to explore the reserve.

Arriving at the car park, behind the shingle beach acting as a natural barrier from the incoming tide, Tom saw a notable police presence. He parked the car and headed for the cordon, manned by three uniformed constables. A small group of curious onlookers had gathered. The shingle beach ran from Blakeney Point all the way around the coast to Cromer in the distance. The cordon blocked passage for anyone seeking to head out to the point where the tide entered Blakeney Harbour, some four miles distant.

The beach was frequently used by local dog walkers, birders and anglers. Once past Cley, the beach stretched out to the Point but no further, becoming a natural dead end unless you had a boat in the harbour. One of the officers recognised him, lifting the tape to allow him to pass easily. A liveried Range Rover was parked at the top of the shingle bank and one of the officers gestured towards it. From what Eric had told him on the phone, the body was to be found at the harbour's mouth. The car ride would be far more preferable than the hour and a half hike across the shingle to reach it.

From the vantage point at the top of the bank, Tom had a great view over the wetlands. The River Glaven fed into Blakeney Harbour, as did Cabbage Creek from the other side. At low tide, the retreating sea would leave tidal pools both at the harbour's edge and on the sea-facing beach itself before returning to flood the area extensively. The towns between Cley and Stiffkey could all be troubled by a tidal surge, even located as they were a good half mile from the sea, due to the low-lying level of the land. Multiple boats lay at anchor, dotted around the harbour, and the lights of Blakeney and Morton were visible in the distance as dusk rapidly approached. High tide would be upon them in a few hours and his hope was that the body's location was far enough towards the dunes to enable time for the technicians to process the scene. Eric was confident that their presence was necessary.

A small group congregating around the harbour mouth came into view. Several heads turned in their direction upon hearing the sound of the Range Rover. One of them detached himself from the group and came to meet them. It was Eric. Tom got out of the car and looked beyond Eric, seeing several forensic investigation officers setting up portable lights attached to a nearby generator. They were settling in for the evening, if not the night.

"Hi, Eric," he said, still trying to see exactly where the victim lay amongst the group. "What is it we are dealing with?"

"Hi, Tom. A dead woman." He turned and pointed to the lateral mark, a tall metal pole indicating the safe route into the entrance channel to the harbour beyond the dunes. Green buoys marked the opposing side, offering the boats their route of safe passage. "It looks like she was snagged on the marker there, probably as the tide went out."

Tom looked to where he pointed. Besides the lateral mark itself, there were also the remnants of a more substantial harbour edge, now rotting and barely visible above the incoming water. At low tide the area looked altogether very different. You could almost walk to the lateral mark itself, an open space of flat sand revealing itself each day between the sea and the dunes of around two hundred metres, more in some places. The receding tide left extensive tidal pools amongst the wet sand, often frequented by members of the seal colony that attracted visitors to those providing boat tours. As if reading his thoughts, Eric spoke.

"Those passing earlier figured it was a seal carcass. They get washed up here all the time," he said.

Tom nodded, scanning the area. "Who called it in?"

"Someone out looking at the wildlife," Eric said. "He spotted the birds picking at it. Wondered what was going on."

"What... at the body?"

Eric grimaced, confirming the answer without saying so.

"Much damage?" Tom asked.

"Yeah... mainly to the eyes."

"And who brought the body ashore?"

"Coastguard," Eric said. "They found her clothing caught on the wood at the harbour mouth. Whether it would have stayed there much longer is hard to say. I think it's a pure fluke the body wasn't washed out into the North Sea. We might never have found her."

Tom gestured towards the team processing the scene and Eric fell into step alongside him as they approached the others. Tom was keen to see what he could under natural light, what was left of it, before they'd have to rely on portable lamps.

"They brought her clear of the expected high-water line," Eric said, "figuring we'd need to investigate."

It couldn't be helped, but the body being where it now lay was nothing to do with the investigation. If anything, placing it where they had could well contaminate the evidence with sand or stone now present where it hadn't been and confusing things. However, it probably didn't matter much in the grand scheme of things. A body left in the water for any length of time would destroy any remaining trace evidence in no time at all.

The assembled group parted to allow them to come closer. Tom dropped to his haunches to examine the body. As Eric had said, it was a woman. Elderly by the look of her. Time spent in the water, leading to discolouration of the skin, could make determining the age troublesome, but he guessed she was easily in her early eighties. Despite being wrapped in either a thick woven shawl, or a blanket of some description, she appeared frail. Her skin was white and drawn tightly across her face and hands. The latter were bony and skeletal. One of the eyes was unrecognisable, the birds attacking it just as Eric described. There was also a wound to the left side of the head, just beyond the hairline behind the temple. Her hair was a variety of competing shades of grey, much of it bordering on white if you looked past the detritus of sand and grit caught amongst the strands. Several lengths of seaweed clung to her face and neck, giving off a distinctive

odour. Tom spoke without averting his eyes from the body, continuing his examination.

"How long has she been in the water?"

"Not long."

Tom glanced up as Dr Williams came alongside him, lowering herself to his level with some difficulty. He reached out and offered his hand to help her steady herself, and she accepted gratefully.

"I should imagine she went into the water at some point last night or thereabouts," she said. "The water has affected the liver temperature by rapidly cooling the body, as you can imagine it would, making a precise estimation at this point difficult but I would say—" She ran her eye the length of the body, scrunching up her nose as she thought hard. "No more than twenty-four hours, perhaps less."

Tom's brow furrowed. "That's a nasty head wound. Likely pre-mortem?"

"I would say so, yes. And before you ask, no, I don't know if it's the most likely cause of death."

Tom's face split a half-smile. "Looks pretty extensive though."

Dr Williams agreed. "I dare say it would have caused her some problems when she went into the water. A blow like that would disorientate if not leave her unconscious and liable to drowning."

"Any possibility it was accidental? From a fall, perhaps?" Tom asked, assessing the shawl was indeed what she was wrapped in rather than a blanket, opening up the possibility of an accidental explanation rather than anything more sinister.

"Anything is possible, but without knowing where she was prior to being found it would be pure conjecture. It's one hell of a thump on the head though."

Eric piped up from behind them. "Coastguard reckon there's no way she would have been drawn out of the harbour had she fallen from the path, or gone in from the beach for that matter," he said, looking along the stretch Tom had approached from. "Falling from any of the walking routes through the marshes she wouldn't have been sucked out beyond the harbour mouth and if she'd fallen in the shingle and been drawn out by the receding tide, then she'd be well on her way to Scandinavia or continental Europe by now."

Tom thought on that for a moment. "So, if we're to consider this an accident then we're looking at her pitching overboard as an explanation?"



Eric nodded.

"Any boats adrift in the harbour or spotted out there?" Tom said, looking at the inky darkness of the horizon.

"Nothing reported, no, but I'll check again."

"What about abandoned cars, either in Blakeney or Cley?"

"Anything currently in the beach car parks has been accounted for. In the towns or villages themselves, it's a little harder. I've arranged a door to door to see if anyone has seen anything abandoned."

Tom turned his attention to her clothing. It was substantial. She wore hiking boots and he could see thick socks protruding from above the ankle-line. Her trousers were also suitable for spending time exposed to the elements. He recognised the brand. Dr Williams followed his gaze.

"Rambler not a sailor, if you ask me."

Tom nodded. "My thoughts as well."

"The shawl is intriguing, though."

Tom was inclined to agree. The shawl was woollen, knitted. It was possible he was confusing man-made fibres with natural materials, but that wasn't the issue. It was a garment that might be thrown on over a top, perhaps on a late-summer's evening, when a full coat would be too much, or perhaps for knocking around the house in just to take the chill off. However, it wasn't something you'd expect to offer a great deal of protection from the elements, a far cry from the choice of trousers and footwear. It wouldn't be what you'd expect to wear aboard a vessel of any size at sea. Beneath the shawl was a simple shirt, buttoning up the front to a collar fastened to the top. It was cotton, thick, but nonetheless not suitable for wear at sea. Every instinct suggested this was not a boating accident.

"Any sign of other injuries or evidence of a struggle?"

Dr Williams frowned. "No injuries to speak of that I can see with the naked eye. Obviously, once she's back in pathology and stripped, there might be something."

"But?"

"But two of her fingernails on her left hand are broken. The index and the forefinger," she said, leaning over and pointing them out to him.

Tom narrowed his gaze, angling his head to see better. It was getting dark and the portable lights weren't up and running yet. He took out his mobile and illuminated the hand with the torch function. The nails were indeed snapped, the one on the forefinger had split almost the full length of

the nail plate, revealing the tender tissue beneath. The damage looked recent, as if it had caught on something and been torn away. Perhaps someone had done it intentionally, which was a sobering thought.

"Any identification?" Tom asked, turning to Eric.

The detective constable held up a transparent evidence bag containing a small fabric purse. It was brown, the exterior corduroy lined with a zip pocket to one side and the folding flap on the other was buttoned shut. It was clearly wet through. Donning a set of nitrile gloves, Tom stood up and stepped away from the body. Eric handed him the bag.

Removing the contents, Tom carefully unbuttoned the one side which fell open in his palm to reveal numerous card slots. The interior lining was lime green with a repeating flowery motif. Several credit cards were present, along with a couple of store loyalty cards. All of them bore the same name: *M Beckett*. Behind the card slots was a small pocket, barely large enough for anything beyond a book of stamps or another card. It was here that he found a driving licence. The laminated plastic was damaged by the passage of time, and more recently the water, but was still readable. Putting a light over it, he saw the licence was issued nine years previously and although the photograph showed someone with a fuller face and darker hair, it was clearly the same person lying nearby in the sand.

"Mary Beckett," Tom said for his own benefit, glancing sideways at Eric. He knew the constable would already have looked. "Lives in Letheringsett. What's that from here... fifteen minutes?"

"If that. More like ten, I would say."

Tom checked her birth date, doing a quick mental calculation. "She's eighty-three."

Eric looked around, the sound of the team working nearby was drowned out by the incoming tide breaking on the shingle beach.

"Has anyone notified the next of kin yet?"

Eric nodded. "Uniform have been round." By the expression on his face, he seemed concerned he'd erred. "That's okay, isn't it."

Tom was lost in thought for a moment, weighing up what they knew, and didn't quite hear the question. "Sorry, Eric," he said, raising his eyebrows. "What was that?"

"I had uniform call round at her address. That's okay, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes. Of course. Is anyone home?"

Eric nodded. "Sister. Janet Beckett. They live together. But I told uniform not to say anything beyond that we'd located a body."

"Good. Come on. Let's go and see if she can shed any light on what Mary was doing out this way last night."

## CHAPTER THREE

---

MARY BECKETT'S home was an imposing traditional brick and flint building situated on the Blakeney Road between the hamlet of Glandford and Letheringsett, a small village near to the Georgian market town of Holt. The house itself was sited only a stone's throw from the boundary of the Bayfield Hall estate. Driving through the entrance gates, flanked by stone pillars with ornately-carved caps, the wheels crunched the gravel beneath the car.

A police car was already in the driveway, a uniformed constable standing at the front door. He stepped forward as Tom and Eric got out of the car, offering them both a greeting.

"Hello, Tom," the constable said. Tom recognised him, Billy Chambers, one of the more senior of the local officers, conscientious and very experienced. "Kathy's inside with the next of kin now," he said, referring to PC Kathy Rix, indicating over his shoulder towards the house.

"Lives with her sister as I understand it, right?" Tom asked.

"Yes, just the two of them, although Janet – the sister – has asked for her son to be contacted. I spoke with him a little while ago and he's on his way over."

"Right you are," Tom said. "Where can we find them?"

"Drawing room. Down the hall, second door on the left."

Tom nodded his thanks and Eric smiled as they left the constable standing in the porch. The front door was ajar and Tom pushed it open, finding the weight incredible in comparison to modern equivalents. If the exterior was impressive, then the period decor inside the house was more so. The hall was lined with oak panelling, by the darkness of the colour it

was obviously original. The flooring visible throughout was tiled in a geometric pattern leading up to a central staircase that split on a half landing before disappearing off to the landing on either side of the building above them. Several of the tiles at their feet were cracked or broken with missing pieces. For all the grandeur of the high ceilings and ornate plasterwork, the house was tired with discoloured wallpaper and an assortment of mismatching furniture haphazardly placed around the open spaces seemingly without much thought offered to the aesthetics.

Tom noticed how their shoes didn't squeak on the tiles as they walked, another clear indication that the surface wasn't maintained particularly well. Thinking on it, that wasn't a surprise. Presumably, Mary Beckett's sister was of a similar age, and this house would require the presence of a small team to keep on top of the upkeep in a residence like this. Tom noticed Eric scanning the interior as they walked, wondering if he was having the same thoughts. He caught Eric's eye as they approached the door to the drawing room.

"Imagine living in a house like this," Eric said, keeping his voice low so no one else could overhear. "I mean, Becca's flat would fit in this... what do you call it?"

"Atrium."

"Yeah, this atrium."

Eric was right. It was an impressive home. Judging by the length of the stone wall running the boundary of the road, Tom guessed the grounds stretching away on the other side of the house would be equally grand. Tom raised his hand and announced their presence by knocking on the door before entering, not wishing to give anyone a fright by barging in. PC Kathy Rix stood before an ornately-carved stone fireplace, her hands clasped behind her back. She smiled warmly at him and Eric as they entered. The room was large, matching the oversized dimensions of the building in general, but it was dark. The walls were painted a deep shade of crimson and heavy floor-to-ceiling curtains, together with sweeping pelmets, hung before the double-aspect sash and case windows blocking what little light the setting sun offered to the interior.

Tom focussed his attention on the woman sitting alone on a large sofa. She appeared to be dwarfed by the furniture. Like everything in the room, the sofa was grand, covered in red velvet and edged in ornately-carved mahogany arms and legs. It didn't look very comfortable, but it certainly

befitted the interior. Her eyes flitted to him and away again. Tom smiled as he came over to her, joined alongside him by Kathy Rix. She introduced them.

"Jan, this is Tom Janssen," she said, dispensing with some of the formality. He didn't mind trusting Kathy's judgement, for it was she who had spent the most time with her. "Tom is the lead detective investigating what happened to your sister."

The woman glanced up at him again, forcing a weak smile that attempted to mask an anxious expression. She was perched on the edge of the sofa, sitting side on, her knees pressed together at the hem of her grey tweed skirt. She wore a matching jacket. Her hands were set firmly in her lap. He judged her to be in her late seventies, possibly older. Her hair was grey, pulled back from her forehead and tied at the nape of her neck, appearing to be dry and frizzy. It struck him that her appearance was similar to the surroundings of the home in which she lived. The angular features of her bone structure, her poise and the slightly grand clothing, clearly vintage, was indicative of a grace and style to match her surroundings but, as with the home itself, she seemed unable to present herself in the manner she may have wished to be seen in.

Perhaps the stress of the situation, along with the weariness in her expression, gave him this impression. It would be understandable.

"May I sit down?" he asked.

She replied with a brief nod, her expression softening as he sat down on the sofa adjacent to her own. He was right, it wasn't comfortable at all.

"Mrs Beckett, I'm very sorry for your loss."

She nodded again, appreciating the sentiment.

"Thank you," she said, trying to maintain her composure but it was clear she was finding this a challenge. She fiddled with her fingers, turning her hands over and over in her lap. "Please do call me Jan," she said. Her eyes swept the room. Tom followed and they both saw Eric gazing at the ceiling, lined with more intricate coving. Eric noticed their lingering gaze and he mouthed a silent *sorry* to Tom and took out his notebook. Tom could see Kathy Rix stifling an amused smile.

"When did you last see your sister?" Tom asked.

"Yesterday. Late afternoon, shortly after three o'clock to be certain. She left as usual. I know it was then because the clock in the hall chimes, only it is always late. There's a fault in the mechanism somewhere, but Mary hasn't

had a man out to take care of it yet. Anyway, that was when she left and I didn't expect to see her until today."

"She would stay out late?"

Jan nodded. "Usually, yes. Besides, I head off to bed by nine most nights. I know it's early but I tire easily these days, what with my arthritis and the sciatica being what it is. I often won't see her until breakfast."

"Where was she going?"

"To do her rounds."

"I'm sorry. Her rounds?"

"Mary is a Watcher... self-appointed, I should say."

Tom inclined his head, shooting a quick glance at Kathy and Eric but, judging by their expressions, neither of them was aware of the term either.

"A Watcher?"

"Protecting the wildlife," Janet explained. "The Watchers keep an eye on the reserves. The natural world has been my sister's life's work. She goes out every night, especially during the breeding seasons. Has done for years."

"Protecting them from whom?"

"Vandals... collectors, poachers... whomever really."

"I wasn't aware that this was a big problem in these parts," Tom said. He should be aware of it if it was. It was his job, after all.

"Oh, you would be surprised, I'm sure. There are a number of collectors around here. Perhaps not as active as they once were but, if an opportunity arose, they'd be sure to make the most of it. You mark my words."

"And what would Mary do exactly?"

Jan's brow furrowed as she thought her answer through. "Take notes of any cars parked that looked out of place, maybe take photographs of people loitering around. If kids were hanging around," she nodded towards Eric, who frowned at the assertion of his age, "making fires and having parties, she'd move them on. She'd call you on occasion as well."

That was news to Tom but he glanced at Kathy for confirmation as it would be uniform who would receive the call. Kathy nodded subtly.

"And last night was the same as any other?" Tom asked, turning back to Jan.

"Yes. She was expecting to be out late. She's been saying recently that there is talk of some rare species nesting locally. Apparently, everyone is all of a flutter about it."

Eric grinned, recognising the pun. Only when Janet looked at him, her mouth falling open at his reaction, did he realise she genuinely hadn't intended it. He turned his attention to his notebook, his cheeks flushing.

"What species is it?" Tom asked, seeking to provide a smooth exploration of her knowledge. Janet shook her head.

"I don't know. Wildlife is very much my sister's passion rather than mine."

"I see," Tom said glumly. "Yesterday? Mary left the house around three?"

"Yes, she did. If I remember right, she was starting at Holm yesterday, walking through the dunes and checking on the reserve there. Then she usually breaks up her trips by splitting her time between reserves further along the coast, such as Holkham and Scolt Head."

"And how often does she do this?"

Jan sat more upright. Tom didn't realise that was possible. "Every night," she said. "Without fail. Unless she's ill of course."

"Is she? Ill, I mean."

"None of us are getting any younger, Detective Janssen," she said, leaning slightly in his direction.

"That's true," he said, smiling warmly. "Tell me, has your sister had any run-ins with anyone recently? Or mentioned seeing anyone out there on her rounds that'd caused her some concern?"

Jan averted her eyes from his gaze.

"Jan," Tom pressed. "Anything at all? It might help."

She took a deep breath and steadied herself before fixing him with her eye.

"My sister... Mary... was quite a difficult person to be around. As much as it pains me to say so, she rubbed some people up the wrong way. Revelled in it, one might say."

The door to the drawing room opened and a man entered. He was flushed, eyes wide, and appeared short of breath.

"Mum!" he said, ignoring everyone else present and crossing to where Janet was sitting. "I came as quickly as I could."

She made to stand, but the man intercepted her and encouraged her to remain where she was. Only then did he look around the room and acknowledge the others present. Tom rose from his seat, and Janet Beckett's son addressed him first.



"Are you in charge?" he asked. Tom nodded. He extended his hand towards Tom. "Justin. Justin Howell."

Tom accepted the offer and they shook hands. "DI Tom Janssen."

"What happened to my aunt, Inspector?"

"That's what we're looking to find out," Tom said, taking a measure of the newcomer as they both sat down, Tom in his seat and Justin alongside his mother. She reached out to him and he took her hand in both of his own, holding them in a supportive embrace. Justin was easily older than Tom, well into his fifties. He was a chubby man, perhaps five-seven or eight tall, with a receding wisp of hair that he flicked up in a quiff at the front, more in hope than substance. Judging by his frame and stature, Tom figured he was often red-faced and not only when hurrying to be at his mother's side. He was dressed in a sky blue cashmere jumper over burgundy trousers. Despite his supportive embrace, he seemed a little uncomfortable holding his mother's hand and repeatedly adjusted the hold but ensured he never let go. She seemed to draw strength from his presence.

Tom returned his attention to Jan.

"You were telling us how Mary can be difficult to get along with," he said.

"I'll say," Justin said, before immediately apologising for the interruption.

Tom angled his head in Justin's direction, encouraging him to speak with a gesture of an open hand.

"I'm sorry," Justin continued, raising his own hand by way of a further apology. "It's just that Aunt Mary could be... a little spiky. She was pretty full on with her opinions. If she had a goal in mind, then nothing was going to stop her achieving it, no matter what. People's feelings were an unfortunate element of collateral damage."

Jan was nodding along with her son's description of her sister.

"Justin's quite correct," she said almost apologetically. "Mary was passionate about her beliefs – that, as a species, we are custodians of this planet and not its masters."

"Was there anyone in particular who she fell out with? Anyone who might bear her a grudge."

"Why are you asking?" Justin interrupted before his mother could reply. "I thought this was some kind of an accident."

Tom fixed him with a stare. "I'm afraid this was definitely no accident, Mr Howell."

Justin held Tom's gaze for a moment, his lips parting as he took in the gravity of the statement. Then he raised a hand to his face, covering his mouth, and averted his eyes from Tom's. Janet answered the question.

"I'm afraid that will be a very long list, Inspector," she said, shaking her head. "Mary has clashed with many people over the years. Property developers, power generation companies... even her fellow birders if they crossed some perceived line she'd set out."

"Really?" Tom asked, checking with Eric that he'd made a note. The constable was diligently scribbling away in his pad.

"Aunt Mary made a lot of enemies over the years, Inspector," Justin said. "And I choose enemies as opposed to adversaries on purpose. She ruffled a lot of feathers over the years."

Tom glanced towards Eric, but the young man either didn't hear or found this reference less amusing because he didn't look up.

"Did she speak about anything or anyone in particular recently?"

Jan thought hard, her face a picture of concentration. "Well..." she looked at her son, who inclined his head to one side as if he wasn't sure. Janet looked back at Tom and he raised his eyebrows in encouragement. "Mary has been... worried recently. I say recently, but this has been a thing for a while now."

"What has?" Tom asked.

"She claimed that someone has been following her... appearing in places when she's on her own. Frightening her."

Tom sat back in his seat a little, pursing his lips, waiting for her to elaborate, but Janet seemed to hesitate.

"Frighten her how?" he asked.

"Following her at night... hanging around the house. That type of thing. She's been going on about it for years."

"You don't sound convinced."

Jan shook her head briefly. "I'm not, not really."

"Why not?"

"I've never seen any of it," she said. "I've been thinking for a while... well, it's all in her head."

Tom's eyes narrowed as he contemplated it.

"You think she was imagining it or making it up?"

"Perhaps both," Justin said. "I know it sounds bad, but there is a history of ill health on my mother's side of the family."

"By ill health, you mean mental health?" Tom asked.

Both Janet and her son confirmed it with emphatic nods, but it was Janet who spoke.

"Our mother suffered from dementia and our father was always considered a little odd throughout his life. None of us realised at the time but, looking back, I would think he suffered from a mild schizophrenia that passed by undiagnosed. It was the way of things back then, wasn't it. We just knuckled down and got on with it. I thought Mary was seeing things, her mind filling in the gaps where there was nothing to see. After all, no matter how many times we looked, and we did look, we never saw what she did. Isn't that right?" she said, looking at her son.

"Yes. Several nights I sat up with a metal poker in my hand because Aunt Mary was distraught, but I never saw anyone either. In the end I think she stopped mentioning it because... because we found it quite annoying. I guess we shouldn't have been so dismissive after all."

The last comment was said with a sense of obvious shame attached.

"There was no way you could have known," Tom said, although the guilt in their expressions was such that the words fell on deaf ears. "But the two of you have no idea who she could be bumping heads with more recently?"

Jan shook her head. "Perhaps she wrote something in her diary."

"Do you know where she keeps it?"

"Yes, of course, in her study. Please, come with me and I'll show you."

## CHAPTER FOUR

---

JAN BECKETT LED them from the drawing room and along a short corridor towards an extensive kitchen with a large orangery at the rear of the house. Only they didn't enter, instead turning to the left and into a link corridor leading to the other side of the house where they came to a closed door adjacent to a full-height sash window overlooking the grounds. With precious little light pollution, the grounds were rapidly being swallowed by the approach of night, but Tom cast a glance through the window and observed what would once have been manicured lawns and ornamental beds. There was a fountain encircled by a gravelled pathway. None of what he could see appeared well maintained, although in its heyday the grounds would have been quite a sight. Now, it all looked a little sad and neglected.

Jan Beckett placed a hand on the rounded brass knob and tried the door, but it was locked. She looked at her son and Justin stepped to the other side of the corridor and a small bookcase. He moved a tome from the top shelf and produced a key from behind it, passing it to his mother. She partially opened the door, the hinges creaking as she did so.

"My sister was very private. She didn't want the staff to enter her study."

"We will need a list of their names when you can," Tom said.

"Oh, we don't have anyone anymore, Inspector. But my sister was a creature of habit," Janet said, pushing the door open further.

The scene greeting them stopped her in her tracks.

"Oh... my word," Janet all but whispered, raising a hand to cover her mouth which had fallen open.

Tom gently placed a restraining hand on her shoulder, ensuring she didn't move forward, not that she seemed ready to. Easing past her, Tom

entered the study. The room was in complete disarray. A large desk was set before a period fireplace with bookcases lining the walls, all of which were crammed full of books. The pedestal drawers to either side of the chair were open, their contents emptied onto the desk itself or strewn across the floor. Likewise, there were multiple box files on the floor, cast aside, their contents scattered in every direction. The study had dual aspect windows, much as most of the reception rooms in the house appeared to. The lower sash of one had been forced and upon closer inspection Tom could see it had been jimmied from the outside. This style of window required special locks to fasten them in place as they were far too easy to force entry for those who knew how.

Tom took great care where he placed his footing as he entered. Eric took up position alongside Jan, hovering with intent to stop her moving should she attempt to do so. Justin appeared in the doorway behind them, looking past Eric to survey the interior.

"Good God, whatever happened here?" he asked no one in particular.

Tom ignored him, whereas Eric merely glanced in the man's direction and raised a hand to indicate he should move no further. Tom made his way around to the other side of the desk, noting that the drawers must have been secured because each of them had been crudely forced, most likely with a screwdriver judging from the damage. He looked back to the doorway, fixing his eyes on Jan.

"This is recent," he said. "You didn't hear anything suspicious?"

Jan was momentarily dumbstruck, only managing the most rudimentary of responses – a shake of the head.

"I... I... don't sleep well, so I take my tablets every night before retiring. I'm afraid I don't wake at all until I rise the following day," she said, her voice cracking as she spoke. "Someone was here... here in the house while I was sleeping?"

She turned to her son for reassurance, Tom noting she was beginning to tremble at the very notion of her vulnerability. Eric moved aside and allowed her to go to Justin, who placed a comforting arm around his mother, making soothing sounds as she put her head against his chest. Although he was not a tall man, only marginally taller than Eric, he enveloped his mother within his arms, who seemed far frailer than Tom had first thought.

"It would appear that whoever it was, was looking for something," Tom said, casting a sweeping glance around the room. "Have you any idea what that might be?"

Jan shook her head. Tom met Justin's eye and he pursed his lips before also shaking his head.

"My aunt played her cards close to her chest, Inspector. She wasn't one to share," Justin said. "The by-product of being a loner all her life I should imagine."

"She never married?" Tom asked, although there were plenty of ways one could form a life partnership without requiring a marital commitment, especially these days.

"No, it never happened," Justin said. "I'm presuming there was more to it than just her inability to trust people. After all, there's someone for everyone in this world... isn't there, Mum," he said, looking down at his mother who'd gathered herself. She nodded.

"Mary did come close once," she said.

"Really? When was this?" Justin asked as if hearing it for the first time.

Jan patted her son's chest softly. "A long time ago. Before I even met your father. He was a nice lad, David. But Father wouldn't hear of it. He was offered short shrift when he came courting."

Tom was curious. His expression must have conveyed so because Janet continued, moving out of her son's grasp, but not by far.

"Our father was a lovely man, Inspector, but he was very much a product of his times."

"How do you mean?"

"David was the son of immigrants, you see," Janet said. "Not that they weren't without means. David's father was a successful businessman. That was part of the reason why they were easily able to move here, as well as why they were allowed. But that didn't make up for being of the wrong faith. David's family were Jewish."

"Why haven't I heard this before?" Justin asked.

Jan dismissed her son with a flick of the hand. "It's all ancient history. However, I don't think Mary ever forgave our father for his stance. She wasn't bothered about the family religion any more than I was but Father... and, to a lesser extent Mother, were. It was probably more down to the standing in the community above anything else."

"Poor Aunt Mary," Justin said, frowning. "I didn't realise Grandpa was such a... I don't know what to say."

"Don't be too harsh on him, Justin. Things were different back then. Incomers weren't trusted... especially those fleeing Germany in the thirties."

Tom wondered how much opinions had really changed over the years, perhaps the focus of prejudice was aimed in another direction, but the sentiments weren't altogether different. And within Norfolk, you could be a resident there for four decades and still be considered an incomer, irrespective of your choice of religion or country of origin.

"We're going to need to have some crime scene technicians come by and sweep this room," Tom said. "Has any other room in the house been turned over, even in the slightest way?"

"Not as far as I know."

"Okay, we'll have a look around if you don't mind?"

"No. Please do. Do you think they're likely to return?" she asked, fear edging her tone. Justin placed his hand on her shoulder and gently squeezed, drawing an appreciative glance in his direction.

Tom cocked his head. "I would say it's unlikely, judging by our presence, but... it depends on whether they got what they were after. Does your sister use a computer or own a laptop?"

Jan nodded her head vigorously. "A laptop. She always kept it here in the study. As far as I know she never took it from in here."

Tom looked around, searching for it amongst the disorganised mass of paperwork, but to no avail. There were a number of cables under the desk but whatever they'd been connected to was long gone. Maybe the intruder got what they wanted but, judging by the mess they'd made, it was equally likely they were looking for a hard copy of something else and may have taken the laptop in the hope it contained a digital version of whatever they were after.

"What if they come back?" Janet asked.

Tom saw the fear in her eyes, unsurprising considering her sister had just been murdered.

"You can always come and stay at ours," Justin said. "Miriam won't mind, I'm quite sure. And the children would love to have you there."

Jan turned to her son. "I wouldn't want to be any trouble. I'd rather stay here... this is my home and—"

"And what?" Justin asked with a concerned expression.

"And I feel closer to Mary. I know that's daft," she said, looking at Tom.

"Not at all. It's quite understandable," Tom said. "I'll make sure we keep a uniformed presence here at the house for the time being until we have a better idea what we're dealing with. That will ensure your safety."

"Thank you, Inspector," Justin said, nodding his appreciation. "I'll stay here as well tonight. If you don't mind, Mum. Just to give you peace of mind."

Jan patted her son's hand affectionately. "Yes, thank you. You're a wonderful young man, always putting yourself out for me."

"Don't be silly," Justin said, smiling warmly.

Tom gestured for everyone to step out of the room, keen to close it off until the crime scene technicians could attend. If they were lucky, the intruder may have left a print or some other telltale piece of trace evidence to give them a clue as to what this was all about. Once they were all out in the corridor, Tom closed the door.

"It would be best if no one entered this room again until my officers arrive. That way we can maintain the integrity of the evidence. I want that to be clearly understood."

"No one will go in there, Inspector. I'll see to it," Justin said.

"Very well. Jan, if possible, would you mind accompanying DC Collet back to the drawing room and perhaps you could start making a list of any individuals or companies your sister may have had dealings with over the years. That includes anyone she may have fallen out with as well as more mundane interactions – gardeners, tradesmen. Anyone who may have ended up bearing a grudge."

Eric offered to support her if needed but she declined, although did so with an appreciative smile.

"Eric, start with the most recent and work backwards."

The constable nodded and followed Janet back along the corridor. Justin, sensing Tom wanted to speak with him alone, held back. Once his mother was out of earshot, Justin made to speak but struggled to assemble the words. In the end, Tom spoke first.

"You're worried about your mother, aren't you?" he asked. It was a question that didn't need asking for it was obvious but by way of an icebreaker, it worked.

"Absolutely, yes. I mean, wouldn't you be?"



Tom nodded.

"Do you think this is really all about my aunt's activism?"

"You're not convinced?"

"It's not that, not really," Justin said, his eyebrows knitting together. "It's just that... she's been so heavily involved in environmental issues... over the years, that it just seems odd that it's now. I mean, there's nothing new that I'm aware of. Certainly nothing that would lead to an outcome such as this. Unless..."

"Unless?" Tom asked. Justin met his eye.

"Unless... she was keeping something from us."

Tom waited patiently to see if he would say anything more. Perhaps the suggestion might tease a memory from the back of his mind he hadn't felt important until now. Nothing was forthcoming.

"Can I ask a personal question related to your family?"

"Yes, of course. Ask away."

"Your mother... living here with her sister as they do," Tom said, "how did that—"

"Come about?" Tom nodded.

"My father passed away a number of years ago. I was in my early thirties at the time, an only child," he said, tilting his head to one side. "Mother didn't cope well. My father was always one to handle the finances, all of their affairs really, whereas my mother ran the house. As it turned out, my old man didn't have the nous required to handle money. It would appear I'm not a chip off the old block."

"You work in finance?"

"Yes, yes. Risk assessment mainly. I manage financial risk for a credit broker. It's not very interesting but it pays the bills," he said with a smile.

Now the flushed cheeks had settled since his arrival, Justin Howell looked older than his years. He may manage finances well but it would appear he wasn't as competent when it came to managing stress.

"Anyway," Justin continued, "when my father died it left Mother in a bit of a bind. The life insurance wasn't quite what we believed it to be and, once all was said and done with the estate, Mother wasn't left with much. Miriam and I weren't in a position to help. We were just starting out. Aunt Mary lived here." He gestured in a circular motion with his hand, indicating the house. "She allowed Mother to move back in with her. Up until that

point, she'd only been rattling around in this place all by herself. It was a pleasant fit."

"You said your aunt never married. Is this the family home?"

"Oh yes, absolutely. This old place has been in the family's possession for four generations."

"There must be wealth in that side of the family then," Tom said. "If you don't mind me asking?"

Justin shook his head. "Significant wealth, yes. At least our ancestors were incredibly privileged. As a family, we are quite proud of our heritage. I think that's why Mother reverted to her maiden name, probably at the request of Aunt Mary – looking back. *Howell* never sat well with mother, or my aunt for that matter." Tom found that curious but didn't question it. Those of a certain generation tended to stick with their married name regardless, in his experience, even if the marriage ended in an acrimonious dispute. He dismissed the thought as Justin continued. "However, as is often the way with these things, as said wealth is passed down the line it only has to come into the hands of one or two colourful characters to have a detrimental impact on the prospects of future generations." He looked around as if he could see through the walls to the exterior. "The estate used to be far more substantial than it is now, you know. Much of the land nearby, stretching up to that of the Bayfield used to be farmed and managed by our family. Those were the days!"

Tom smiled at the comment.

"Are there other siblings? Or your aunt, I'm presuming she didn't have any children."

"No, no, it's just Aunt Mary here. She was the eldest of the two. Grandpa never said so, at least not as far as I know, but he resented the fact he only managed to sire daughters. He loved them, don't get me wrong, it's just that he always wanted a son to carry forward the family name. He was very traditional in that respect."

"Is that why Mary inherited the house?"

Justin's expression cut a rueful smile. "Very astute, Inspector."

Tom inclined his head. "I'm a detective. It goes with the warrant card."

"Yes, Aunt Mary, being the eldest, inherited Grandpa's estate in its entirety. I should imagine that was one reason she never felt the pressure to marry, such as it was. She was a... formidable woman, you might say. Downright stubborn is another description! I wasn't aware of her infatuation

– that's a little presumptuous of me – I wasn't *aware* of her love affair with this David fellow. I've often wondered if her *tastes* were leaning in a different direction altogether. Hearing all of this casts her in a rather different light now. Perhaps she never met anyone who made her feel that way again. Sad really, isn't it?"

"I agree," Tom said, raising his eyebrows. "Although I would like to think there is more than one person out there for each of us."

"Just not at the same time," Justin said, raising his own eyebrows in reply.

"Hopefully not. Come on, let's return to the others. I appreciate your candour, Mr Howell."

## CHAPTER FIVE

---

"OKAY, Eric, talk me through the list of possible suspects," Tom said, placing a cup of coffee and a small brown paper bag on the desk in front of the constable. Eric's eyes lit up and he opened the bag, keenly examining the contents. It was a cinnamon bun, topped with sticky icing, and Eric's favourite accompaniment to a takeaway coffee. Judging by the files surrounding him and the slightly dishevelled overall appearance, it would seem as if Eric had been beaver away for a few hours already.

Tom found a ball of paper in his pocket, reminding him of the previous night. By the time they'd finished at the Becketts' house and he'd made it home to Alice and Saffy, the two of them were already sound asleep. He found a scribbled note pinned to the fridge door by a magnet, one of the ones Saffy collected the tokens for and they'd sent away. The note was signed by both of them, letting him know there was still food set aside for him in the fridge. Alice had made a pasta sauce after all. Unfurling the paper in his hand, the smiley face, a Saffy original motif, and the kisses ensured he didn't throw it in the bin. Smoothing the note out, he folded it and returned it to his pocket.

Hanging his coat by the door, he sipped at his own coffee as he pulled out a chair. He could see Eric deliberating over whether or not he could manage a bite now or should he wait to finish the briefing. He chose the latter, turning over the lip of the bag and instead making do with the coffee. Tom's own drink had sufficiently cooled since he'd picked them up from his favourite haunt, and Eric certainly looked like he needed the caffeine hit.

"What time did you come in this morning?" Tom asked, glancing at the clock. It was only half past seven.

"Oh... you know, I always struggle to sleep when we're in the early stages of a case."

"You should be careful of that, young man."

Eric swallowed another mouthful of coffee, waving away Tom's concern for his welfare.

"It's just my mind was buzzing with all the possibilities that Janet Beckett threw our way last night. I remembered some of the campaigns Mary was involved with locally. Not that I could recall her involvement, but it got me thinking. And whenever I've got a lot on my mind, churning things over in my head, I end up really restless and..."

"And?"

"And it stops Becca from sleeping," Eric said glumly, rubbing at his cheek with his free hand. He hadn't shaved this morning. "She likes her sleep, does Becca. She booted me out around four."

"Out of her flat?" Tom asked, his eyebrows knitting together. Eric flapped at the suggestion.

"No, no. Just the bedroom. I ended up on the sofa but it's only a two-seater and I know I'm not very tall but even I can't lie on it. So..." he said, putting his cup down and turning to his computer screen. He clicked on a tab and the display changed to a social media page. "I did some more research. Janet Beckett mentioned her sister's disapproval of the proposed Wash Bank wind farm."

"Hasn't that already gone through?" Tom asked, sitting back in his chair, nursing what was left of his drink.

Eric shook his head. "Not quite. It's been back and forth ever since they obtained the licence from the Crown Estate after the last tranche of sites were put out to tender."

"Who did?"

"Prometheus Energy," Eric confirmed. "Initially they were part of a consortium planning to share development costs across several sites off the Norfolk coast. Two of the projects haven't been submitted yet, but this one, the smallest, was one they progressed on their own after another company backed out. Consultations went on for a couple of years prior to the actual proposal going into the planners, who looked to rubber-stamp it pretty quickly by all accounts."

"So, what's the delay?" Tom asked, finishing his drink whilst eyeing the screen.

"Local pressure group."

"Mary Beckett?"

Eric nodded. "The very same. She set up an action group, FOWL." Tom raised his eyebrows in query. "Friends of Wildlife."

"Catchy."

"Yes quite, isn't it," Eric said. "Mary founded it. This is the social media page for the group," Eric said, gesturing towards the screen with his index finger, the others wrapped around his cup. "It's a mix of local interest types, environmental campaigners... probably your average NIMBY lot as well."

Tom frowned. "Forgive me, but I thought environmentalists were pro wind energy."

Eric shook his head. "It's not the concept of wind power they object to but the associated infrastructure. The energy has to come ashore at some point and it's that location where the issues arise. Wind farms of this size require a substantial footprint for the switching station and then the associated transmission infrastructure to integrate it to the national grid. Let's set aside for the moment the thousands of cubic tonnes of concrete that are poured on the ocean floor to lay the bases for the turbines themselves."

"You have been busy," Tom said, impressed with the constable's research.

"To be honest, I'm quite interested in it. Becca took the children from her class to visit the Sheringham Shoal Wind Farm centre last term," Eric said, his face splitting into a wide grin. "I went along as one of the helpers."

"That's right, she's an NQT, isn't she?"

Eric bobbed his head. "Yes, her days as a teaching assistant are over. They gave her Year One this time around."

"And you volunteered to go along on the class trip?" Tom asked, picturing Eric being dragged in all directions by children younger than Saffy. "How did that go?"

Eric blew out his cheeks, running a hand through his hair. "Becca's a natural with kids... I'm better off catching villains. How they corral fifty-odd five-year-olds in a learning environment on a daily basis is beyond my skill set."

Tom laughed.

"Anyway," Eric said, returning to his briefing, "Mary Beckett and her cohorts have been very organised. They submitted a detailed objection to the proposed site for the switching station, as well as the alternative location

Prometheus Energy came up with. Despite the planning department warmly receiving the initial application – it was anticipated the approval was almost a mere formality – the group managed to find objections in the planner's own rubric that forced a review. It all caused a bit of a stink, from what I can see. The local councillors are on board with the proposal, as are many of the local residents."

"So where are we with it now? Would the death of Mary Beckett impact on the development either way?"

Eric scrunched up his face. "I'm not there yet. But I'm working on it."

"Fair enough. You've made a good start," Tom said. He sank back in his chair, putting his hands behind his head and interlocking his fingers. "I'm surprised, though."

Eric looked over inquisitively.

"You implied there's a bit of push-back from the locals against the environmentalists regarding their campaign. In my experience, the locals around these parts are already quite environmentally conscious."

"I agree. I reckon it's all part of the agricultural heritage, living off both the land and the sea for generations," Eric said. "It's easy to see the disagreement just from reading the comment threads underneath the group posts. Some people don't pull their punches when they're sitting comfortably behind a keyboard."

"Keep plugging away. Come at it from all angles. Who has the most to gain from the proposal, besides Prometheus Energy themselves? Although I want you to find out as much as you can about them too. Furthermore, who's been leading the fightback against Mary and her group, and why? Did you find anything regarding this stalker Janet was referring to?"

"Stalker?" Cassie asked, entering the ops room and hanging her coat up. "Who's got a stalker?"

"Morning, Cassie," Tom said. Eric also smiled, offering her a brief wave.

She came to join them, casting an eye over Eric's desk as he rummaged through some papers, eventually producing a document which he brandished triumphantly.

"Here it is," he said, grinning. "It's an old crime report filed three years ago. Mary Beckett reported an incident down at the bird watcher's reserve at the back of Holm Dunes."

"What have I missed? Who's Mary Beckett?" Cassie asked, eyeing their takeaway coffee cups and apparently hopeful there was one available for her. "Does she have a stalker?"

"She's the victim Eric and I went to look at out at Blakeney yesterday," Tom said. "And no, sorry, I didn't get you a coffee. I'll do better next time."

DS Cassie Knight inclined her head, clearly disappointed. "Victim? Seriously, what have I missed?"

"Murdered," Eric stated.

"Wow. I take an early finish, having spent months working on beauty-spot break-ins, and you guys land a murder inquiry," she said with a wry smile. "Next time I want to head off early to the shops, stop me, yeah." Eric grinned whereas Tom raised one eyebrow in reply. "Any suspects?"

"Nothing concrete," Tom said. "Eric – the report?"

"Oh, yes. Right you are," Eric said, eyeing the paper bag in front of him as Cassie sat down. Tom guessed he'd missed breakfast. "It's going back a bit. Three years, to be precise. Mary contacted us after she was harassed late one evening on her way back to her car. Probably having done her rounds."

Cassie looked at Eric inquisitively and he waved away her question.

"I'll fill you in later," Eric said, handing her a clutch of paper.

Cassie accepted the reply, her eyes narrowing as she scanned Eric's notes made the previous day in a bid to catch up.

"Mary claimed to have someone stalking her, leaving nasties for her along with general harassment – malicious phone calls, tyres on her car let down. That sort of thing."

"Define *nasties* for me please?" Tom asked.

"Eric reread the document to ensure he got the detail correct. "In this particular case she said a clutch of birds were mutilated and strung up for her to find. Heads removed, gutted... pleasant."

Tom nodded sagely, his brow furrowing. "Standard practice for those twisted individuals looking to intimidate wildlife campaigners, to be honest. I've heard of them stringing them up on gates, porches or even nailing them to front doors, if they feel particularly brave on occasion." Tom sighed. "Anything come out of the investigation?"

Eric shook his head. "Nope. Uniform went down to the reserve to take a look and couldn't find any sign of the birds. There were calls made to Mary Beckett's mobile phone but it was an unknown number on a burner, so



untraceable. With no one else to corroborate her story, she was advised to contact us again if something should happen, but there was no further action to take."

Tom rubbed at his cheeks with both hands, drawing a deep breath as he lowered his hands. "Any further reports on the matter?"

"No. If anything else happened, then Mary didn't report it to us."

Cassie chimed in at this point. "If she felt we didn't respond adequately, then she had no reason to believe we'd actually do anything. Present company excepted, obviously."

"Yes, well, we shouldn't judge our colleagues too harshly. It was three years ago. Maybe the harassment tailed off as they moved on to other things," Tom said.

"Or people," Cassie countered.

"True. Although, she did complain about it to her sister and nephew," Tom said. "At least that's what they conveyed to Eric and myself last night. It remains to be seen if it's at all related to her death, though. Too early to rule anything out." He looked at Eric. "It's a long shot but run that burner number through the system again. You never know, it might be active."

"If not, the number will probably have been reassigned to someone else by now," Eric said, sounding doubtful.

"Run it anyway. You never know."

Eric made a note to do so.

"And while you're at it, see if you can figure out who she was at odds with at the time," Tom said. "Hindsight's a wonderful thing but maybe this is the culmination of a long-held grudge."

Cassie looked up from her reading, catching Tom's eye. "From what her sister was saying, it looks like she made falling out with people something of a habit. This list looks like a local bingo card she was chalking off. One of them is Daniel Crowe. Is he anything to do with Crowe Builders?"

Tom nodded. "Yes, his firm does a lot of the site builds around these parts. He's been going for years, took the business on from his father. Why?"

"Oh, I was looking around one of their show homes at the weekend," Cassie said. "I don't want to be renting forever."

"In that case, you can look at that angle—"

Cassie's desk phone cut Tom off. She answered. Her expression clouded as she listened, snapping her fingers to get Eric's attention and then silently

asking for a pen. Eric handed her a pen and a note pad. Cassie scribbled something down. Tom cocked his head and saw it was an address, before he returned his focus to Eric.

"Knock up a list of those names we are aware of who took issue with Mary, starting with the most recent. Then it's a case of tracking whereabouts and asking the questions. I'm leaning towards this being the work of a local or, at the very least, someone who knows the area. We could tell from the crime scene she was unlikely to have been killed out at the point. But someone put the body in the water, either dropping her from a boat or transporting her out there. We should consider whether it was in any way symbolic or just remote enough that no one was likely to see."

Eric concurred. "It's a trek out there, though. I can think of a dozen places that are easier to get to in terms of accessibility than dragging a body out to Blakeney Point."

"That's true," Tom said, cupping his chin with thumb and forefinger. "But Mary was a slight figure, not tall. She wouldn't have been too much of a weight for anyone physically capable, and I doubt she was carried out there. Someone will have used a boat to get across the wetlands. If she was dumped out there on the high tide, it wouldn't have been much trouble to do so unobserved and with speed. That's why I'm leaning towards a local."

"I'd better add access to a boat on to the list as well, then," Eric said.

Tom agreed. "Might be worth checking if anyone is missing one too. They could easily think a rowing boat has slipped its mooring rather than being the result of anything untoward."

Cassie hung up, turning to Tom with a frown. He waited expectantly.

"Looks like it's catching," she said. "Uniform have a suspicious death they want us to take a look at in Cley." Tom's eyes narrowed. The proximity to where Mary Beckett's body was found concerned him. "Officers on the ground think it's either a burglary gone wrong or a domestic."

Tom exhaled. "Okay. Eric, you crack on here. Cassie, you go and see if you can confirm uniform's suspicions. I'll fill in the DCI and see if I can get some preliminary advice from the pathologist regarding Mary Beckett's autopsy. Looks like it's going to be a busy few days."

Cassie rose from her chair, tearing the page with the address written from the pad before handing both it and the pen back to Eric. She was pulling on her coat when Tom caught her eye. He smiled.

"What?" she asked.

"I hope you got what you needed from the shops because it sounds like you'll not get a chance again for a while."

"Afraid not," she replied. "Like I said, house hunting. I'm in a holiday let and the landlord wants me out so he can quadruple the rent during the summer. At this rate, I'll be sleeping on a park bench by the end of the month."

This was a common occurrence many locals experienced. His only surprise was that Cassie hadn't been turfed out already, seeing as the season was already getting underway. It would ramp up over the next few weeks until peak prices were being charged.

"That'll teach you to rent a place with a sea view," he said. Cassie growled in his direction, feigning anger. He laughed. "If the worst happens, you can always crash on my boat until you get yourself sorted. I'm never there these days anyway."

Cassie scrunched up her face as she checked where her car keys were. "I'd have to be desperate."

"Thanks very much."

"No, not like that. It's just I get seasick."

"It's not anchored off the coast, Cassie!"

"Okay, I'll bear it in mind," she said, winking at him as she turned and headed out of ops, flicking her hair to one side as she went.

"Better than a bench," he muttered under his breath.

## CHAPTER SIX

---

CASSIE KNIGHT PULLED up alongside a liveried police car. The street was particularly narrow here, even by the usual measure of coastal towns and villages built prior to the advent of the motor car. There was precious little by way of parking. The road was the main one through the village, narrowing at several points. Cassie figured this would become a bit of a nightmare once the tourist season really got into gear. Waiting for a break in the traffic, she scanned her mirrors and got out when it was safe to do so just before a lorry rumbled past. She pressed herself against the car until it passed and then hurried around to the nearside, following a footpath enclosed on each side by high stone walls.

Emerging at the other end a few moments later, Cassie found herself with a view across the reed beds towards the sea. Turning to her right, she crossed towards a small complex of buildings in and around a windmill towering above all of those present. It must have been five storeys tall and in immaculate condition with its impressive cap and sails. Great efforts must have gone into preserving it. Looking around, Cassie observed a number of gables on buildings indicative of the village's obvious trading past. Noting how far from the sea the village was, she struggled to see how this place could have been a successful seaport, but then again, much can change over a few centuries. Perhaps the sea used to be closer. She would have to ask Eric. He would know.

A uniformed constable caught her eye. He was standing at the door to a small brick and flint cottage a short distance away, a building nestled in between several others. The walls looked thick and solid, the windows quite small. This was commonplace in old buildings, especially here, built with

functionality in mind where protection from the elements was held in higher regard than aesthetics. Not that they weren't charming.

She approached the officer, recognising him, but couldn't recall his name. He greeted her, stepping out of the property to make room for her. She stopped at the threshold, withdrawing plastic boot covers. If uniform felt the need to call on CID, then it was a fair assumption this was a crime scene.

"What have you found?" she asked, putting the covers on.

"A male. In his late thirties or early forties. Looks like he's bled out from a wound to his torso, but he's lying on his front, so I can't say for sure."

"All right," Cassie said, casting one last glance towards the beautiful scenery before entering the building, knowing she would soon be observing something at the opposite end of the scale. "You'd best show me. Where is he?"

"Kitchen," the constable said, gesturing for her to head through the house to the rear. The interior of the cottage was much as Cassie figured it would be. The ceilings were low and the small windows allowed precious little light to penetrate. Outside, the day was proving fine. The sun was burning off what cloud cover was present, but once Cassie passed into the rear of the cottage, she realised you would be hard pressed to know what the weather was doing beyond the walls. The neighbouring properties were built up, sitting on different levels: their walls extensive and some had mature trees overhanging the boundary. This only added to the lack of daylight penetrating into the interior.

The kitchen appeared to be an addition to the original building at some point in the past, but not recent by any means. However, the windows here were larger, which helped. The kitchen was narrow, a galley style with units on opposing walls, a small sink set beneath the window with a view over what looked like an enclosed courtyard to the side. The smell of blood was strong in the air. The body lay face down between the units, as previously described, with the left arm and shoulder pressed up against the door to the outside. A pool of blood had spread out from beneath the body, the epicentre of which appeared to be the midriff, although the pool now encompassed the man's arms, upper legs and his head and was seeping beneath the plinth of the cabinets. The blood at the edge of the pool was drying, indicative of the flow having ceased hours ago. Most likely this was

when the heart stopped pumping. The blood was a deep burgundy colour. Cassie figured he must have succumbed relatively quickly because the darker shade of red indicated a major organ had been damaged in the assault.

Getting as close as she could to the body without disturbing the pool of drying blood, not easy due to the cramped conditions, Cassie dropped to her haunches. The man lay on his front, but his face was looking to his left. The eyes were open, vacant and lifeless. She'd seen death before, many times. Each face told its own story about the victim's passage from this life to the next. In this case, she considered, he died in a mixture of pain and disbelief.

Scanning the body, she took his measure. He had dark hair, probably once black but was now showing a bit of grey. There was the possibility he dyed his hair because much of it looked too black when considering the greying nearer the scalp. Or maybe he was naturally lucky. His face was angular with a strong jaw. The eyes were dark, matching the complexion of his skin tone. He was wearing a white shirt, the collar unbuttoned to the chest and the cuffs turned up. His trousers were somewhere between formal and casual wear, good quality, as were his shoes. The same could be said for his wristwatch. She could easily recognise the cheaper imitation offerings and this wasn't one of those. It will have cost the wearer thousands of pounds.

"Who called it in?" Cassie asked without breaking her gaze over the body.

"Neighbours."

"Did they stumble across him or did they hear something yesterday?"

"They heard the cat at the door." Cassie glanced towards the door, seeing the cat flap and off to the left was a small metal bowl with water in it and another, a pink plastic one, set alongside with some dried scraps of cat food on the rim. "Apparently the neighbours take care of the cat while he's away, which is quite often. He never locks the cat flap so, when they heard the constant meowing, they poked their head over the wall to see what was going on. Realising the cat couldn't get in, they came to investigate and saw him through the window."

Cassie noted the flap was blocked by the victim's shoulder.

"Did they enter?"

The constable shook his head. "They have a key to the back door, but the body is blocking it. Thought about breaking a window but called us

instead."

"And how did you get in?"

"Upstairs window was open. We borrowed a neighbour's ladder."

Cassie nodded, thinking the constable was pretty big to be clambering through these cottage casement windows, particularly with all the associated kit officers carry these days, but she didn't mention it. Instead, she imagined the unceremonious entrance he must have made upstairs.

"Did you notice anything out of place up there?"

Again, the officer shook his head. "Couldn't see any signs of a break-in or a struggle, upstairs or down."

Cassie stood, turning her attention to the kitchen. She couldn't get to the other end of the room without stepping over the body and in the blood. From where she stood in the kitchen, she could see most of it anyway. Nothing seemed out of place. The window above the sink was closed. The door to the dishwasher was cracked open. It was a slimline model ideal for smaller properties or couples, and it appeared to be full. A couple of pans were on the hob and she inspected the contents. From the volume of residue on the sides they must have contained quite a bit of food. Pasta and sauce was her best guess.

The fridge was to her right and pinching the handle with a pair of nitrile gloves between her fingers, she opened the door. The contents were meagre, stocked with basics like milk, bacon and cheese. The salad boxes had a few vegetables in them that were past their best but still edible. A bottle of white wine lay in a two-bottle rack above the third shelf. There were, however, no tubs with leftovers. Living alone, she was used to cooking for one and if she had to guess, this man had company for a meal yesterday. Whether that was lunch or dinner, she didn't know. The pathologist would need to determine the time of death and then they'd know. Either way, he'd cleaned up before he was killed.

"Have you run a check to see who this place is registered to?"

"Yes. The Electoral Roll only shows one resident, Adrian Gage. Judging by the description on the police national computer, this is likely to be him. He's not known to us, no prior arrests or convictions."

"Okay, let's make sure. Can you scout around and see if there's any photo ID lying around, holiday snaps, that type of thing?" Cassie said. The constable nodded and turned to head back to the front of the house to begin a search. "But try not to touch anything!"

The constable glanced at her over his shoulder. His straight face conveyed his irritation at the perception of his lack of competence, but he didn't comment, merely nodding and continuing on. Cassie felt bad, for a second, before remembering that even incompetent people could survive in the police and dismissed her guilt. Her thoughts turned to what could have resulted in this man's death. There was no sign of forced entry as far as she could tell. The front door was intact, the windows to the front of the property and this one in the kitchen were closed. Seemingly one of the bedroom windows was open but the officer needed a ladder to reach it. It wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that an assailant might access the cottage from there but it wasn't exactly stealthy. Perhaps the homeowner returned and disturbed a burglar. That was possible but, looking around, aside from the dead man at her feet, there was no sign of a struggle. He looked physically fit, in good shape at any rate, and was therefore likely to put up some resistance.

Lowering herself down, she inspected his fingers and the visible skin of his forearms. She couldn't see any defensive wounds to the hands or arms. At this point she was assuming he was stabbed rather than shot. With neighbouring buildings so densely packed in the immediate area the sound of a gunshot would likely not pass by unnoticed and they were far from an inner-city industrial area where something could mask the noise. The sound here would carry. A stabbing was more realistic. The wound, or wounds, were to the front indicating the victim was facing or turning to face his assailant when he was attacked. It would be logical to presume in this scenario that he would either have fought back or at the very least instinctively raised his hands to protect himself. The absence of defensive wounds was surprising.

All of this left her with the nagging sense that the victim most likely knew his attacker. Perhaps he was even so relaxed in their presence that he didn't see the attack coming and therefore didn't have a chance to react. Furthermore, this suggested there wasn't an altercation either. Had there been one, he would be on edge and therefore more predisposed to defend himself, even in the event of a surprise attack. Her eyes swept the kitchen again, falling on a knife block on the work surface next to the hob. There were five slots for a matching set, but one was missing. It could be in the dishwasher waiting to be cleaned or it could be the murder weapon in an unplanned homicide. Taking out her mobile, she called Tom Janssen. He



answered immediately, but her reception was so poor, he was breaking up. She hurried into the front of the house, finding the call clearer.

"Hi, Tom, sorry about that."

"That's okay. What do you have there?"

"I'd say uniform are right," she said as the constable attracted her attention from the front sitting room. "It does look like we have a murder on our hands." Still with the phone to her ear, she entered and took a closer look at the picture frame the officer was guiding her to. It was a shot of a man in a jumpsuit, still with a parachute attached to his back. Evidently it had been taken shortly after landing. It certainly wasn't local. He was standing on a beach with palm trees amid dense foliage in the background. It must have been a spectacular location to land in having jumped from an aeroplane. He looked much younger in the shot, more hair and quite dashing, but it was unmistakably the same man as the one lying dead in the kitchen.

"Cassie?"

"Yes, Tom. Sorry, I'm still here," she said, angling her head as she stared at the image. He must be dying his hair. "Yeah. I reckon he was killed sometime yesterday, probably from lunchtime onwards. No sign of a break-in as yet. The place is neat and tidy." She scanned the sitting room. It was well presented with modern furnishings but in a contemporary, minimalist style. To be fair, the cottage was so small that it wouldn't be possible to fill it with much more furniture. There wasn't the space. She silently mouthed the words *keep looking* to the constable and he nodded as she turned and headed back into the hall, mounting the stairs to the upper floor.

"You said uniform thought it might be a burglary gone wrong or a domestic," Tom said.

Reaching the landing, Cassie looked around. There were three doors off it. One was to a bathroom and the other two must be bedrooms. Neither of which would be very large.

"I don't see the former," she said, easing one door open to reveal a double bed. It was unmade, with the duvet cast back to the foot of the bed as if someone had thrown it open as they got out of bed. "The place is too tidy. Burglars are hardly ones to carefully pick through possessions – in and out in less than five minutes, turning everything upside down as they go. That's not what I'm seeing."

"Interrupted?"

"Nah. Not likely. All too calm. The victim is clean," she said, referring to his lack of injuries consistent with a struggle. "Aside from bleeding to death obviously,"

"All right. I'll have CSI sent over to you. They'll be earning their money this week."

Cassie stepped back from the bedroom, pushing open the door to the second bedroom. This one was much smaller, sharing its floor area with the adjacent bathroom. There was a single bed pushed against one wall. This one was fully made up. The duvet was pink with a colourful unicorn on the front standing beneath a rainbow with a cast of other horses in the background. Several cuddly toys were placed alongside one another at the foot of the bed, with more on the floor in the far corner of the room. Cassie wondered if there was a missing child they should be concerned about but, as she searched the room, it didn't look like somewhere that was occupied all of the time. It was too neat, too tidy, much like the rest of the house. They would need to check with the neighbours though, just in case.

"There's something about this that doesn't add up, Tom," she said, shaking her head, having almost forgotten Tom was still on the phone.

"How so?"

"I think the victim had company yesterday," she said. "It could be a domestic argument gone bad, but..."

"But what?"

"I don't know," she said after a moment of reflection. "Just... something. Leave it with me," she said, retreating from the child's bedroom and entering the bathroom. A bath towel was on the floor and another was hanging on a hook alongside the shower. There was a floor mat beside the shower and it still looked damp. She could tell because it was a pastel colour and the damp patches showed. If the victim, or guest, showered yesterday prior to the murder then it leaned towards late afternoon. Maybe they both showered or the killer cleaned up before they left. She looked for telltale spots of blood on the floor, towels or basin, but there were none to be seen.

"Do you have a name for the victim?" Tom asked.

"Unconfirmed as yet, but we think it's the resident, Adrian Gage. He's not known to us, though."

Cassie heard a sharp intake of breath. It was so stark that it grabbed her attention. She waited but Tom didn't speak, all she could hear was his

breathing.

"Tom?"

"Yes... yes, I'm here."

Something in his tone piqued her curiosity.

"Do you know him?"

"No. Not personally, but... well, I sort of know him."

"Who is he then?"

"He's Alice's ex-husband."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

---

THE LANE LEADING down to the old quay opened out at a small car park positioned almost in the shadow of the windmill. Tom Janssen got out of the car, feeling the gentle breeze against his face coming at him across the wetlands of Blakeney Reserve. The breeze passing through the reeds sounded like a thousand voices asking you to be quiet in harmony. Tamara's hair swept across her face and she tried to tuck it behind her ears, but her efforts were largely a waste of time. Her eyes were drawn across to the harbour and the point beyond. She pointed in the direction of the harbour mouth.

"Is that where you found Mary Beckett?"

"Yes, just the other side of the dunes there," he said, narrowing his eyes due to the glare of the sun.

"One heck of a coincidence. Two bodies in the space of twenty-four hours."

Tom chewed on his lower lip. It certainly was. However, for the life of him he couldn't figure out how these cases might be linked. The two victims seemed the polar opposite of one another in every conceivable measure, from age demographic to professional and social circles. Although he wouldn't rule anything out. When it came to murder, sometimes the most implausible became probable once the investigation shaped up.

"Beautiful place," Tamara said.

"A hidden gem of the north coast."

They walked the short distance to where uniform had set up a cordon, at the entrance to the windmill complex. For a number of years, the windmill, along with the ancillary buildings, had been run as holiday accommodation

on a not-for-profit basis to aid the upkeep of the windmill itself, which was maintained in superb condition and a famous local landmark. Adrian Gage's house was not one of these but could be accessed via a narrow pathway, passing through the complex, leading to a managed route through the salt marshes beyond and on to the coast, popular both with locals and walkers alike.

Word of their arrival spread and Cassie appeared from one of the buildings to meet them. The owners of the site had allowed the police to bring their CSI vehicles and equipment as close as possible, hence the cordon being established where it was. Some of the village residents were standing nearby, probably just as surprised as the investigation team were to have a second crime scene so close to the first. It wouldn't be long before the local grapevine passed the morbid news around the community. This worried Tom; his thoughts were of Alice and most notably, Saffy. He caught Tamara watching him intently. For how long he didn't know. Cassie arrived before he could inquire as to what she was thinking.

"Hi," she said, looking between the two of them. "I'm sorry, Tom."

He shrugged off the sentiment. "It's okay. I didn't know him at all. It's more... you know."

"Yeah," Cassie said, smiling weakly.

"Has it been confirmed as a murder?" Tamara asked, taking the lead.

Cassie nodded. "Yes. The FME arrived a half hour ago and together with the crime scene techs examined the body properly. It's as I thought, stab wounds to the chest. Estimated time of death was yesterday afternoon."

"Right," Tamara said. "Let's take a look."

Cassie turned, but before Tom could move, Tamara placed a restraining hand on his forearm. Cassie glanced over her shoulder, apparently sensing they weren't following. Tamara inclined her head and Cassie nodded, continuing.

"What is it?" Tom asked.

"I guess Saffy is in school today?"

"Yes, of course."

"Alice?"

"Day off today, why?"

"Maybe you should go home, speak to her yourself before she hears it from someone else."

Tom was a little irritated. He was anticipating doing exactly that, but he wanted to take a look at the crime scene first.

"Yes, I plan to, but—"

"No," Tamara said, shaking her head. "I know you'll want to be having a look around but you need to be thinking of Alice and Saffy ahead of anything else."

"I am!"

He realised he snapped at her, but if she took offence, then she didn't show it. Tamara's demeanour remained as it always did, calm and measured.

"Tom... you can't be here."

Something in her tone cut through and his irritation evaporated. He saw the hidden meaning behind what she was getting at.

"I really didn't know him. There's no conflict of interest—"

"You're shacked up with the victim's ex-wife, Tom. It doesn't matter what the reality is, perception is key here. You can't be involved in this case. You can't be anywhere near it."

She was right. As usual. And it was her decision; she was the DCI and it was her call. It wasn't just the crime scene he wouldn't be stepping into. Tamara's expression told him that. The idea of being shut out of the case entirely bothered him though. He silently agreed, pursing his lips.

"Will you be all right getting back to the station later?"

"I'm sure Cassie will oblige," she said, her expression softening and appearing sympathetic. She glanced over towards the marshes. "I'm sorry, Tom. I know it stinks—"

He waved away her apology. "No, it's fine. You're right. I shouldn't be involved."

"It would also put you in an awkward position with Alice. She'll be asking questions—"

"Questions that I shouldn't answer."

"Right," Tamara said, offering him a supportive wink. He frowned and then smiled.

"Where on earth did that come from?"

Tamara flushed. "Yeah... never been one for winking... I don't know why. It seemed fitting. I won't do it again," she smiled sheepishly. "Seriously, though. Will you be okay with this?"

Tom laughed. "Of course. Don't worry. I'm sure I'll be busy enough with the Beckett case anyway."

"True enough. Any reason to think these cases might be linked?"

"Not that I can see, no."

"Good. Listen," she said, raising a hand accompanied by a thoughtful expression, "what do you know about Adrian Gage? Did Alice mention him much?"

Tom shook his head. "Only in relation to Saffy. Not that he would win any competition in the *best father* categories from what I can gather."

"And it's comments like that that justify my decision to keep you well away from the investigation." Tom waved away her comment. "What did he do for a living?"

"He was a journalist. Freelance," Tom said. "I think he nailed a couple of big scoops for the nationals a few years back but as to what he was up to these days, I couldn't say."

"What about next of kin? Any relatives living locally as far as you know?"

Tom's brow furrowed. "I think he has a sister who lives this way, but I've never met her."

Tamara smiled. "Great, thanks." She reached out and put a gentle hand on his arm, tilting her head towards her shoulder. "Go home. See Alice and... well, you know."

Tom knew she was thinking of Saffy. His thoughts were already drifting to her as well. Children had to learn to experience loss, it was important for their emotional development, but that shouldn't come with the loss of a parent. It was one of the harshest lessons any person would face in life, but to do so at her age was almost unbearable to contemplate.

"Okay. I'll check in with you later."

Tom turned to leave.

"Take care, Tom," Tamara said as he walked away. He glanced back and smiled in thanks.

---

TAMARA GREAVE SAW CASSIE hovering at the entrance to the house as soon as she entered the passage between the complex and the path through to the

marshes. If Cassie was surprised to see her approaching alone, then she hid it well.

"Tom gone to see Alice?"

Tamara nodded. "Yes. He wanted her to hear it from him rather than one of the locals spreading it around."

The explanation was partly true, but she saw no need to announce her decision to keep him away from the case. That would be clear soon enough. Cassie handed her covers for her shoes and they both put them on.

"CSI have photographed the body and are happy for us to take a look around. It's a bit of a tight squeeze inside, what with everyone doing their thing."

Once they were ready, Tamara indicated for Cassie to lead and they entered the house. Tamara noticed a few of the local residents watching from nearby windows. The proximity of the other residences offered the possibility of an eyewitness having seen or heard something from the day before. They walked along a narrow entrance hall, Tamara glancing into a front-facing sitting room as they passed. A CSI technician, clad in white paper coveralls, was documenting something. They came to the kitchen, Tamara recognising Dr Williams, their local doctor who doubled up as their on-call forensic medical examiner, standing beside the body. The doctor greeted her arrival.

"Hi Tamara," she said with a warm smile. "I appreciate the extra work and all but I do have patients I'm supposed to be looking after as well, you know."

Tamara smiled. "I know. We'll have to check if someone has put something in the water around here. What can you tell me?"

Dr Fiona Williams turned her attention back to the deceased. "Cassie has identified him, so she can fill you on his age, so I won't bother with the guesswork. As tempting as it is to pretend I don't already know, and then judge his age perfectly."

"Stabbing?" Tamara asked, glancing at Cassie beside her.

"Yes. Three clear wounds to the torso," Dr Williams said, lowering herself carefully, so she could indicate the wounds.

To avoid contaminating the scene by risking stepping in the blood, the CSI team had placed upturned plastic milk crates on the floor for the officers to use as steppingstones to get around the kitchen. Dr Williams was currently perched upon two of these.



"As I said, three wounds. One to the stomach and two to the upper torso. I suspect one of those pierced the poor soul's heart, which would have led to him bleeding out before he could summon help."

"Thoughts on the weapon?"

"Nothing more complicated than a knife," Dr Williams said. She glanced up at the work surface, pointing to the knife block. "Cassie noticed a blade is missing. Judging from the width of the empty slot, I wouldn't be surprised if that turned out to be the murder weapon. The width of the stab wounds is consistent, so you can rule out a screwdriver or anything narrower."

Cassie pointed to the open dishwasher. "That's not been run and it's full. No sign of the missing knife in there or any of the drawers. It's a strong possibility."

"Okay. Organise the uniforms outside to sweep the immediate area. If the killer took it with them, they may have discarded it nearby."

"Will do," Cassie said, turning and leaving the room.

"May I?" Tamara asked and Dr Williams gingerly stepped down from the crates, allowing her to step up. She made a cursory inspection of the body, focussing on his hands. The doctor noticed.

"No indication of defensive wounds."

Tamara glanced up, acknowledging the point. She looked at his fingers, seeing he had long nails, long for a man at any rate. She pointed to them.

"Yes, I noticed that too. He appears to be quite a clean man, not a lot of dirt under those nails, but he's not too concerned about ragged edges. There is some material there worth a more detailed examination by the lab. It looks like some blue fibres got caught up in the nails under his thumb and forefinger. If I had to guess I'd say it was wool or something similar."

"He's not wearing anything woollen," Tamara said aloud, scanning the body as she stood up. "In a struggle perhaps?"

Dr Williams cocked her head. "If it was then it would have been brief. I suspect that wound to his heart would have ended things pretty quickly."

Tamara acknowledged the point and made her way over to the other side of the kitchen, stepping down on the far side of the body. In the corner was a small table with two chairs. It was a tight fit, snug for two and unsuitable for any more than that. A small glass tea-light holder was in the middle of the table but pushed towards the wall and beside that was a wine bottle. Tamara leaned over, seeing it was almost empty. It was a Rioja, one that

was available from supermarkets and one she'd tried herself. Already wearing her nitrile gloves, she turned back to the dishwasher, lowering the door to inspect the contents. The bottom rack had three dirty plates in it, each one evenly spaced out with an unused place setting in between, probably to ensure the water was able to get to them. One of the plates, the one at the rear, had breadcrumbs stuck to it whereas the other two both appeared to have had the same meal served on them. She could tell by the residue of the sauce. Pulling out the top rack, she noted two wine glasses were present. Looking closer, one of these had lipstick on the rim. It was a deep shade of pink. She called through to the other room and one of the technicians appeared in the doorway. She pointed the glasses out to him. They may have already been noted, but she wanted to be sure it wasn't missed.

"Tamara?"

She turned to see Cassie in the doorway.

"What is it?"

Cassie beckoned her to follow and Tamara made her way back towards the front of the house, tentatively stepping over the deceased by way of the crates once again. She followed Cassie into the front sitting room. The cottage was evidently very small, with only the two rooms downstairs. If the footprint of the upstairs was the same, then there would only be two bedrooms and a bathroom. If Gage was a freelance journalist, he was unlikely to have an office and would probably work from home. Her theory was confirmed when Cassie pointed out the cables she'd found in the room, nestling between the arm of the sofa and the wall, almost out of sight.

Tamara dropped to her haunches and followed the path of the cable around to a plug socket in the corner of the room. It was a power pack for a laptop. Imagining herself sitting on this end of the sofa, she looked across the room to the television in the corner. This was the prime viewing spot, confirmed by the extra wear on the fabric of the cushion. Gage probably spent a fair bit of time here with his computer resting in his lap.

"Any sign of the laptop itself?"

Cassie shook her head. "We can't find anything to do with his work at all," she said, looking around the room.

Tamara glanced upwards as if trying to see through the ceiling to the upstairs.

"No, nothing up there," Cassie said. "Two bedrooms. One master and the other set up for a child. Saffy, I should imagine. There's no desk or anything up there in either room. No space for one."

Tamara blew out her cheeks. "If it's a robbery, it stands to reason the laptop would be missing."

"Doesn't look like any robbery I've ever seen before. Look at this place. It's immaculate. And I found Gage's wallet on the TV stand," Cassie said, gesturing towards the television. Tamara's gaze followed. "It has his credit cards and fifty quid in cash. If it's a burglary gone wrong, then this guy was incompetent as well as being the most courteous thief ever."

"Car?"

Cassie produced an evidence bag, holding it aloft. "Keys. I checked the DVLA database and there's a blue Audi A3 registered to Gage at this address. I was just going to have a look outside."

Tamara nodded. "Let's go."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

---

TAMARA LED the way back outside. Emerging into the warm sunshine, standing as they were in a walled front garden in the lee of the building, Tamara shielded her eyes. Looking back at the house she could now see how secluded the property was from the neighbouring ones. Despite being surrounded by others, with a few windows offering a vantage point to partially overlook the property, Gage's cottage had a largely private front garden tucked behind a shoulder-high stone wall that offered a degree of shelter from prying eyes. The courtyard to one side, itself hemmed in by a substantial wall, was not overlooked at all. It seemed to be the way of things in the village. Unlikely to have been so by design, it was more the result of a historical trading quayside that'd been converted into residential accommodation over the years. It wasn't hard to imagine all of these buildings being used to store grain or other goods coming and going back when this village was a coastal port. The small windows and thick walls offered a degree of privacy that wouldn't be found in modern purpose-built housing estates where windows overlooked gardens at every turn. Most houses here didn't seem to have gardens.

Cassie lingered on the path, observing her and then slowly followed her gaze across the surrounding premises.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

Tamara scrunched up her face. She wasn't really sure. Her fear was that although the residents were on top of one another, due to how these properties were entwined they might struggle to find a witness who saw or heard something.

"Has anyone been door to door yet?" Tamara asked.

"Not yet, no."

Tamara nodded and set off for the gate. Once through it was only a few steps into the windmill's complex. Several cars were parked there but there was no sign of Gage's. Coming to the edge of the cordon a number of locals were gathered in the car park, cameras in hand and apparently heading for a walk across the salt marsh, but none of them were looking in that direction. All of them were facing the crime scene, expectantly observing the comings and goings. Cassie and Tamara ducked under the cordon. No one said anything to them and only paid them a cursory glance. The attention was largely focussed on the CSI techs, in their white coveralls, liaising with the two men who'd arrived from the undertakers to transport the body to the morgue once given the all clear to remove it from the scene.

Adrian Gage's car was parked in an open patch of waste ground at the old quayside. There was room here for a half dozen cars. Currently there were only two vehicles there. On the other side of the cars were a number of boats, a mixture of small skiffs and casual sailing vessels moored on the River Glaven. Cassie pressed the button on the fob. The hazard lights flashed as the doors unlocked. Tamara glanced through the passenger window as Cassie opened the driver's door. The car was presented in a similar manner to the house, clean and tidy. She indicated for Cassie to examine the interior while she moved to the boot.

Popping it open, she found it full, in stark contrast to the cabin. Before touching anything, she took a few pictures with her mobile phone and then proceeded to examine the contents. She found a holdall, similar in size to a gym bag, at one side. Unzipping it, she found it was stuffed with changes of clothes. It was all casual gear, T-shirts, a jumper, a pair of jeans along with changes of underwear. It was all clean, neatly folded and packed efficiently. Next to the holdall was a rolled-up sleeping bag and on top of that was an all-weather coat similar to what hikers would wear when out braving the elements. Next to this was a dark blue polyester bag. Pulling it towards her, she realised it contained a rolled-up tent. By the size of it, it couldn't have been more than a two-man offering. Lying horizontally on the floor of the boot, flat against the rear seats, was a collapsible camping chair. A small backpack was tucked between a cardboard box and the rear wheel arch protruding into the boot space. This wasn't for hiking. It was black, unusual for a hiking bag, with a roll-top design that folded over and secured where

the bag met the wearer's back. Feeling it, it was padded to protect the contents.

Opening it, she smiled as she saw the laptop inside along with a clutch of folders and several note pads. She would wait until they were back at the station before emptying the bag. For now, she loosely fingered the contents, spying a set of pocket binoculars in a carry case along with a portable power pack, probably for an emergency recharging of a mobile phone. There were two small pockets on the interior that could be zipped up. One was empty, but the other held a small, opaque plastic box that clicked shut. Carefully opening it, she found a number of SD cards. Closing it, she returned it to the pocket and zipped it up again. Cassie appeared alongside her just as she looked into the cardboard box. The box itself was nothing special. The four flaps on the top had been turned inside to give it more strength and rigidity. Besides a spare petrol can, which was empty, there was a carry case for a single gas burner and the canister required to power it. Tamara picked it up and gave it a shake. It was half empty. Next to the burner was a pair of aluminium tins with folding handles. These could be used both to cook with and eat from. Everything looked to be in very good condition, suggesting it was fairly new.

"Does Adrian Gage strike you as the sort of guy who likes living out in the wilds?" she asked.

Cassie frowned. "Quite the opposite."

"That's what I thought. Everything in the house is very precise."

"Judging by his wardrobe, he's into his designer gear," Cassie said. "I'd say he was more into smart-casual work wear and loafers rather than hiking boots and insect repellent. And his toiletries collection rivals mine. Doesn't seem like the outdoorsy type to me at all."

"This stuff doesn't look very old. I wonder what he's been up to recently?"

"Is that a laptop bag?" Cassie asked.

"Yes. Maybe that will tell us what he's been working on."

"Excuse me."

They both turned to see a constable approaching with a member of the public in tow.

"What can I do for you?" Tamara asked, removing her gloves and gesturing for Cassie to close the boot lid.

"This is Luke McGee," the constable said. "He works here as a caretaker for the windmill accommodation and the site in general. He'd like a word, if that's okay?"

"Of course," Tamara said, smiling warmly at the man and introducing herself and Cassie. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm here most days," McGee said, glancing over his shoulder back towards the windmill. "I take care of the general maintenance, gardening and such like. I know most people who frequent these parts either by name or certainly by face. Bearing in mind what seems to have happened yesterday, I thought I should come forward."

"I'm very pleased you did, Mr McGee," Tamara said, smiling again. The man was nervous, that was clear. He was shifting his weight between his feet and looking almost anywhere but at her. Perhaps he was someone who didn't like eye contact or maybe he was on edge talking to the police. Then again, there'd been a murder on his doorstep and he was understandably rattled. She set aside her cynicism. "Did you see something yesterday?"

"I knew Adrian... to speak to at least. Not well. I mean, we would pass the time of day if we bumped into each other."

"Okay, that's great," Tamara said, trying to encourage him to say whatever was on his mind. "And something from yesterday stuck in your mind?"

Finally, he met her eye, holding her gaze and nodding slowly. Almost immediately he shook his head, evidently uncertain.

"Well either it did or it didn't," she said.

"It did. I mean, I saw someone leaving yesterday."

"Leaving Mr Gage's house?"

"Probably."

The answer was less than convincing.

"Probably?"

"I think so. I mean, I've seen her around before and she isn't one of the residents nor one of those renting the holiday lets."

"And she may have been here to see Mr Gage?"

McGee nodded. "I've seen them talking before."

"What about yesterday specifically?"

"No, I didn't see them together, if that's what you mean."

"Right. And do you know her... either by name or to speak to?" she asked, using his own description.

"No, no I don't. Adrian hasn't been here very long. Less than a year I think."

Tamara thought approaching a year was quite a long time but maybe not in these parts.

"As I say, I've seen her here before. Drives a red Volkswagen. A Golf, I think," he said, his brow furrowing as he thought hard.

"And what time did you see her yesterday?"

"I couldn't tell you when she arrived, but her car was definitely parked here," he said, indicating where they were standing, "at eleven o'clock in the morning when I came into the front yard. I had to weed the raised beds." Tamara looked beyond him to the planters decorating the yard around the windmill site. "I was at it for a couple of hours with a lunch break in between. I saw her leave."

"What time?"

"Around four-ish, I would say. She crossed the yard to walk back to her car."

Tamara looked at Cassie, who was taking notes. She met Tamara's eye and raised an eyebrow. Tamara pursed her lips.

"And did you speak with her at all?"

"No. I acknowledged her, much as I do when anyone walks past me. It's just good manners, isn't it? If someone smiles back then it makes you feel good, even a stranger. It does me, at any rate."

"And did she? Respond?"

McGee chewed on his lower lip. "No. She ignored me. At least I think she ignored me. We made eye contact, but she pretended we didn't."

"And then?"

"Then nothing," McGee said, relaxing. "I shrugged it off and got on with my work. I figured she was having a rotten day. We all have them."

"How was she? Angry, upset?"

"Didn't look pleased. Not angry as such. Flustered, maybe. Yeah, that's a good description. Flustered. She was walking quickly. Her heels were clacking on the ground, scraping like she wasn't walking properly. Does that make sense?"

Tamara inclined her head thoughtfully to one side but didn't answer the question. "But to be clear, you didn't see her coming from Mr Gage's house."

McGee shook his head emphatically.



"Okay, and you've seen her before, so can you describe her to me?"

"About your height," McGee said, looking Tamara up and down. "Brown hair. Long brown hair, straight. Probably in her thirties. Made up. You know, attractive. She was wearing white jeans and a blue jumper. I've always liked a woman in white trousers." Tamara found that particular revelation a little peculiar to be sharing. "I thought the jumper was an odd choice. She must have been warm in it because it was wool or cashmere. Really odd choice for June."

"Been chilly in the mornings recently and the storm hasn't helped."

"Right enough. You should see the damage the wind has done to my plants! Flattened a lot of them."

"Was she carrying anything?" Cassie asked. McGee looked at her. "When she left. Was she carrying anything?"

"What, like a bag or something?"

Cassie shrugged. "Whatever."

"No, I don't think so." His eyes narrowed. "Not that I can remember."

"A red Golf, you say?"

McGee nodded.

"What about Mr Gage in general?" Tamara asked. "What was he like to have around? Did he get many visitors?"

"Can't say as I know, which probably means he didn't. Unless they came after I'd clocked off and gone home. I never heard anyone discussing any loud parties or anything. I reckon he was a quiet bloke. Did his own thing. I never heard anyone say a bad word about him. You should probably speak to the manager. He's here a lot more than me, knows everyone, comings and goings."

"Okay. Is he here now?"

McGee shook his head. "Taken a couple of days off. Switchover with the guests, so it goes quiet until they leave and the next ones arrive."

"Is it okay if I leave you a card and you can have him call me when he's back?"

"Of course, happy to."

"You don't live here then?" Tamara said, indicating towards the windmill.

"No. I live a way up the hill. But I'm here every day."

"And going back to this woman," Tamara said. "Do you happen to remember the number plate on her car, or anything else that might be

useful?"

"Can't help you with the plate, I'm afraid. Never been one for numbers."

"What about her? Anything else stand out in your memory?"

"As I said, been here a few times. Come to think about it, she often had a kid with her."

Cassie and Tamara exchanged glances. Tamara encouraged him to continue.

"Yeah, a few times I saw her with a little girl. She was like a spit of her, so I guess it was her daughter. Yeah, must have been her daughter, thinking about it. Not seen the kid for a while, though."

"Right, thanks for that, Mr McGee. We'll need to speak to you again in order to get all of this down more formally, but I think we can leave it there for now."

"Okay. Well, you know where to find me. Pleased I could help. Nasty business."

"It is that Mr McGee. Thanks for coming forward."

The man turned and left, heading back into the complex and disappearing from view. Cassie sucked air through her teeth, drawing Tamara's attention.

"Go on then," she said. "Say what you're thinking."

"Timescale certainly fits. Regular visitor, flustered."

"And the rest."

Tamara fixed Cassie with a stare. Cassie looked away as she spoke.

"A red Volkswagen Golf?"

Tamara nodded solemnly. "Yep. A red Golf."

## CHAPTER NINE

---

TAMARA WAS WELL aware Cassie was thinking the same as her but chose not to voice it. Pretty soon they would need to address the matter but for now, without anything akin to a smoking gun, they would proceed with caution. She wasn't ready to pull on that particular thread just yet.

"I haven't spoken to the neighbours who found him yet," Cassie said. "Maybe we should have a word before we decide next steps?"

Cassie was being diplomatic, skirting the newly discovered elephant in the room. It was a good idea but what these people had to say might only make matters more uncomfortable. Tamara hoped not. They cut through the yard and onto the path leading to another route across the marsh towards the beach. Tamara noticed a massive cast-iron seal on what she guessed was a tidal gate, part of the system to avoid the village flooding. It didn't look like it had moved in years though, so how effective it might be if needed she wasn't sure.

The gate into the garden of the next-door property was ajar, and Cassie led the way. This was another stone-built house, in the same style as Adrian Gage's, although much larger. It was rectangular, probably a former storage barn, and sat to one side of the plot with its exterior making up the perimeter wall of Gage's courtyard. There were no windows overlooking the area though, so no chance of the occupants having witnessed anything inside the house.

They found a couple sitting at a table on a patio in the shaded part of the garden. The man rose as they approached, forcing a smile. He didn't bother to ask, he'd already guessed they were with the police. Tamara took out her

warrant card anyway and introduced them. They were offered seats and accepted, sitting down opposite the couple.

"This isn't what I was expecting to be doing today, I must say."

Tamara smiled sympathetically. "It must have been quite a shock, finding your neighbour like you did. I am right in thinking it was you and not your wife who found Mr Gage?"

"Yes, it was me. Marjorie," he indicated his wife beside him, "commented on the noise the cat was making. Very unusual. It kept going on and in the end I said I'd have a look."

His wife elaborated.

"Adrian is very good with looking after his cat," she said. "I think the creature loves being home so much it hardly goes out. I always said that was strange, but Adrian described it as a house cat. We used to look after it when he was away."

Tamara thought on that point. "My understanding is that he hadn't lived here very long. Less than a year?"

Marjorie nodded. "Yes, that's true. But he is away so often with his work. And we don't mind, do we, Frank?" Her husband shook his head. "Now that we're retired, we're always around. It really was no problem."

"So, you have a key to the house?"

"Yes, we do. To the back door," Frank said. "But I couldn't open it today... for obvious reasons."

He averted his eyes from Tamara's. She figured he was in shock. Perhaps they both were.

"So, you went next door to see what the issue with the cat was and... looked through the window?"

"Yes, that's right," Frank said. "I thought about smashing the window in front of the kitchen sink to get in but, well, let's face it at my age, I'm not exactly Spiderman am I? I thought it best to call the professionals."

"Were the two of you home yesterday?" They both nodded. "Think back, was there anything that happened yesterday, that you saw or heard, that was maybe a little odd. Particularly in light of what we found today?"

The couple exchanged a quick glance, Marjorie looking down at the cup of tea she was nursing in her hands. Frank cleared his throat before looking at Tamara and then Cassie.

"There was a bit of an argument going on. Raised voices anyway. I wasn't listening in," he said. "I was just out here checking on my tomatoes."

It's a bit hard to know whether they've been getting enough water these past few weeks, what with the weather being so changeable."

Tamara looked to her left, seeing a line of tomato plants staked out along the boundary wall. A number of them had lower leaves that were speckled brown and turning yellow at the tips. If anything, they were getting too much water but she didn't comment.

"Raised voices you say?" Frank confirmed with a brief nod. "Are you sure they were coming from next door, Mr Gage's house?"

"Definitely. I recognised his voice."

"Who was he arguing with, do you know?"

"Oh, couldn't say. It went on for a bit, though. Then it went quiet and I figured it was over."

"And then?"

"That's it. I watered the plants and went back inside."

"You heard nothing more?" He shook his head. "Can you describe a little more about what you heard?"

"Such as?"

"The number of voices you could hear, were they male or female? What were they arguing about?"

Frank exhaled heavily, placing his own cup back down on the table and rubbing his chin with thumb and forefinger. "I would say two voices... one being Adrian and another someone else. As to what they were discussing, and I wouldn't say they were arguing as such because I couldn't hear the words being said."

"Both male or one female?"

"Couldn't say. It was all muffled, sorry."

Tamara waited patiently until she was sure he wasn't about to offer anything more. "Tell me what you made of Adrian?"

"Lovely young man," Marjorie said, sitting forward with a broad smile. "Polite and charming. Raised well." Frank nodded along to his wife's description but didn't appear to want to add anything.

"Did he ever talk about his work with you?"

Frank frowned. "Can't say he did, no. I think he was a photographer or something."

"What makes you think so?"

"I saw him with a serious bit of kit, going out one night. He must have been going to take some night-time shots. I'm quite a keen birder. It's a

prerequisite when you live where we do, and I'd love to have the type of camera he does. I'll bet he has some fantastic shots in his collection, taken day or night."

"Why would you say that?"

"What?"

"Day or night? Was your neighbour prone to being out at all hours?"

It was Marjorie who answered as her husband suddenly came across all bashful. "Adrian did keep some rather odd hours. Coming and going at all manner of times. That's why we think he must be a photographer. You would have odd hours if you're taking landscape shots, sunrise and sunset. And you never really know when the migratory birds will stop this way. You've been up and out in the early hours, or staying out most of the night, just to hear the lark's song, haven't you, Frank," she said tapping her husband's elbow. He lifted his eye to meet Tamara's but only for a second before looking away again.

"Oh yes. All night... sometimes."

Something about his reticence piqued her curiosity but that was a conversation for another time. Instead, Tamara smiled warmly, casting a subtle glance towards Cassie who appeared to have picked up the same point from the comment.

"Right, thank you. One last question, at what time were you out watering your plants yesterday?"

"It would have been a little after five," he said, his eyebrows knitting. Frank seemed much happier discussing the watering of their plants rather than his overnight excursions. "The plants are in the shade by then and I won't risk burning the leaves. So I came out here after five and went back inside fifteen to twenty minutes later. Right, love?"

Marjorie agreed.

Tamara thanked them and they left. Once through the gate and out of earshot, Tamara looked at Cassie. "What they said changes things a little, doesn't it."

"If the caretaker is right and the woman left around four, she can't have been the one having a heated discussion with Gage an hour and a bit later."

"Unless she came back and he didn't see her."

Cassie frowned. "True. One or both of them could have their timings wrong as well. It would be good to get some corroboration. And where's

this camera Frank was talking about? I haven't seen one in the house or car."

"The bag with the laptop has a number of SD cards stored in one of the pockets. They could have been used in a camera. To think, this one was beginning to look like a potentially easy case to solve, if not personally awkward, but now I'm not so sure."

Cassie pursed her lips. Evidently she had something she needed to get out. Tamara encouraged her with a raised eyebrow.

"I think we both know who the red Golf belongs to, don't we?"

"Yes," Tamara said. "And we will speak to her. If Frank hadn't thrown a spanner in the works with the time frame, I would say we should go straight over there now, but perhaps we need to dig around a bit more first."

Cassie accepted that without argument. "I am a little bothered about something else though."

"What's that?"

"I want to know what our Frank has been getting up to when he tells his good lady he's off eyeing birds during the wee small hours. Something tells me they aren't the same birds he's describing to Marjorie."

Tamara watched as a wry smile crossed Cassie's face and she struggled to contain one of her own.

## CHAPTER TEN

---

TOM JANSSEN PULLED up in the driveway of Alice's house. Switching off the engine, he sat back in his seat, pressing his head against the rest. How many times had he been the one to deliver news like this? Too many. But never had he had to break it to someone he was close to. Whom he loved. It felt very different. He considered himself to be an empathetic man, always feeling the pull of the raw emotion that the next of kin would invariably be feeling when learning of a loved one's death. This was different. Alice could take it. She was strong, but Saffy, quite understandably, would be utterly devastated. Placing the heels of his palms to his eyes, he pressed firmly, feeling the beginnings of a stress headache. It was best to get it over with.

Getting out he approached the front door, exhaling deeply as he unlocked it and walked in. Russell heard him first, appearing from the kitchen and excitedly yapping to greet him. His coat was in his hand and by the time he'd hung it on the rack next to the door, Alice was before him, standing in the kitchen doorway. She had an inquisitive look on her face.

"You're home early."

He smiled weakly and walked towards her. Something in his expression must have tipped her off because her warm smile faded as he approached.

"What is it?" she asked.

Tom reached out and took her hands in his, pursing his lips. He couldn't hold her eye, staring at his feet. This was harder than he'd have ever imagined.

"I'm sorry."

"Tom, you're scaring me."



He looked up, taking a deep breath only for Saffy to appear from behind her mother, pushing past her and in between them. Tom released his grip on Alice's hands and stepped back, smiling down at the little girl.

"Tom!" she said, holding her arms aloft. He lowered himself down and she jumped into his arms. He lifted her up and she placed both hands on either cheek, grinning at him. Her hands were soft and felt warm. She was still dressed in her pyjamas.

"Hey, Munchkin," he said, returning her smile. "What are you doing here? I thought you'd be at school."

"She wasn't feeling well this morning. Upset stomach."

"Is that right?" Tom said, focussing on Saffy in his arms. She seemed upbeat enough now. Alice must have read his mind.

"It seemed like the right thing to keep her off for the day. Seems better now, though."

The smile left Saffy's face and she ran a hand through her hair which seemed to be growing curlier by the day.

"I think my tummy hurts a bit again," she said, laying on her apparent weakened state in her tone.

"I am sorry to hear that," Tom said with a frown and emphasised seriousness. "What do you think might make you feel better?"

"I'm not sure," Saffy said, twirling her hair with one hand and looking upwards as she thought through the possibilities. "Ice cream?"

Tom shook his head. "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Erm... biscuits?"

"Not a chance, young lady," Alice said. Tom kissed the girl on the forehead and lowered her back to the floor. "Why don't you go back to the sofa and get under the blanket."

Tom could hear the television now. The voices sounded familiar but he couldn't place which cartoon she was currently streaming. Saffy looked up at Tom and smiled again, turning to her mother and delivering a frown to convey her frustration at not getting what she wanted before scurrying back through the dining area and into the living room. Alice reached out and took Tom's forearm. Now it was her turn to show concern.

"Tom, is everything okay?"

Tom cast an eye in Saffy's direction, as if he could see through the wall between the hall and the living room. They moved into the kitchen and

Alice pushed the door to, ensuring Saffy wouldn't overhear what they were saying.

"What is it?"

"I've just come from Adrian's place."

"Ade's? Why ever have you been there?" she said, but her tone didn't suggest surprise to him. There was something else there but he ignored it. This was hard enough as it is.

"I'm sorry, Alice," he said, glancing sideways to make sure Saffy hadn't moved from her place on the sofa. "Adrian... he was killed yesterday."

Alice's face dropped. For a second that was the only reaction, as if she hadn't properly heard what he'd just said. Then her eyes fluttered and her entire body appeared to shake. He stepped forward to catch her, thinking she was about to faint but she took a half-step away from him, reaching out and steadying herself with one hand on the kitchen worktop. She looked up at him, seemingly searching his face to see if he was telling the truth.

"Are you... I mean, are you sure it's Ade?"

He nodded. "I'm sure. We found him in his house this morning. It's not official yet but, we're sure."

Alice took a deep breath, struggling to do so as she inhaled in ragged draws, her body constricting when she needed it to relax. Turning away from him, she placed her free hand on the worktop alongside the other and leaned over, trying to calm herself.

"My god. Poor Saffy," she said, looking to her right through the glass panes of the door, and into where her daughter was, happily snuggled under a multicoloured blanket watching the television.

Tom waited, unsure of what he should do. He wanted to step forward, take her in his arms and tell her it was all going to be okay. But he didn't. Something about her reaction made him hold off. He wasn't reading anything into it. People react to trauma in different ways. In the past he'd always been in the position of the official delivering bad news. In those cases, he was never the one they would turn to for support. His role then was to convey assurance, to let them know their loss wouldn't pass by without scrutiny and if there was a case to be made against a perpetrator then he would make it. On this occasion he felt more like a passenger in her grief, with no defined responsibilities or specific role to play. Was that because this was her ex-husband? He wasn't sure.

"How?" she said, turning towards him but still using the worktop for support by leaning against it. "How did it happen?"

This was Alice drawing on her inner reserves. What he expected.

"It looks like he was stabbed inside the house."

"You mean... he was..."

"Murdered? Yes."

Her lips parted, moving silently but no words emerged. Her eyes teared and she closed them, forcing herself to keep control. Tom felt something. It was a sensation that both surprised and angered him in almost equal measure. Jealousy. Alice's reaction was understandable. She was married to the man once. They'd shared time together, at one point given each other a promise of a lifetime commitment. They had a child together and would be tied for as long as Saffy was around. At least until she reached maturity. Alice must have loved him. Did she love Adrian more than she loved him? He pushed the thought aside, furious with himself for even considering it.

"When?" she said, in all but a whisper.

"At some point yesterday. We don't know yet. Not for certain."

He was falling back on his authority now, approaching this situation as he would with any other next of kin. He didn't feel as if Alice wanted him to comfort her. His rational mind told him to do so anyway but she seemed cold to his presence, aloof. Was that the shock? He felt something else now. Guilt and then shame. This wasn't about him and he shouldn't make it so. Of course, Adrian's death would rock her world. She would have to be a robot for it not to upset her, let alone the consideration of how she would tell her daughter that her father wouldn't be coming back.

Saffy must have sensed something was amiss. She was a perceptive child, always ready to offer a supportive hug or gentle touch to either an adult or another child. She eased the door open between the kitchen and the living room, peering through the gap and eyeing the two of them suspiciously.

"Mum?"

Alice looked at her daughter, the strain her emotions were taking suddenly visible. She drew a deep breath, kneeling down and encouraging Saffy to come to her with both arms outstretched. She did so, walking forward slowly and purposefully. Despite Alice's best efforts at smiling warmly to allay the girl's fears, the tears escaping the rim of her eyes and trickling down her cheeks destroyed the façade. Saffy's lower lip wobbled

despite not knowing the cause. Alice swept her into her arms and hugged her tightly.

"Mum, that hurts," Saffy said quietly.

Alice loosened her grip. "I'm sorry, darling, really I am," she said, burying her face in the girl's hair.

"What's wrong, Mummy?"

Alice pulled back from her daughter, wiping a hand across her own face before pushing aside the hair from Saffy's. Alice smiled, trying to put on a brave face and be reassuring. She glanced up at Tom, a look Saffy followed. Tom smiled at both of them, unsure of what else he could do.

"Mummy's a little bit sad, darling," Alice said, cocking her head to one side.

"Why?"

Alice took a deep breath, holding her daughter by the upper arms and fixing her eyes on her. "I want you to know how much I love you." She glanced up at him. "How much we love you." Saffy nodded but she still seemed on the verge of tears at seeing her mother so obviously upset. "There's been... an accident... and... and your dad's been hurt."

Saffy stared straight into her mother's eyes, tears flowing. "Is he... is he going to be okay?"

Alice's resolve dissipated and she could no longer keep up the reassuring smile as she whispered the word "no" accompanied with the briefest shake of the head. Saffy's head dropped and she collapsed into her mother's arms. Both of them wept openly, Alice holding her daughter as tightly as she dared. Tom knelt beside them, placing one hand supportively on Alice's back and gently ran the other through Saffy's hair, her face buried in her mother's. Never had he felt so powerless.

---

"IS SHE ASLEEP?"

Alice smiled wearily, nodding. "For now." She ran a hand through her hair, glancing at the clock on the oven. It was nearly eleven. "I need a drink."

He didn't say anything as she took an open bottle of wine from the fridge and picked up a glass from one of the cabinets. Setting the glass

down on the breakfast bar, she unscrewed the cap and poured herself a large glass. Leaving the bottle on the breakfast bar, she came to join him at the dining table, sitting down opposite him. Sipping at her drink, she met his eye.

"Who do you think did it?"

He sat back in his chair, feeling uncomfortable. This was exactly why Tamara had sent him packing from the crime scene. He shook his head.

"Far too early to say."

Alice raised her glass again, staring into the liquid as she did so.

"How has he been when you've spoken to him recently?"

"Ade?"

Tom nodded. Alice shrugged.

"Same as..." she said. "Busy, I guess. Mind you, he always was."

"With work?"

"Yeah. He's never been one to do things by halves. Always committed, always so focussed."

Tom didn't speak. He still regretted the jealousy that flared in him earlier on and was pleased that it wasn't rearing its ugly head again now.

"I can't believe he's gone," Alice said, holding the stem of her glass between thumb and forefinger, twirling it slowly on the table.

"Must be hard. He's been in your life for a long time."

Something in his tone must have sounded off, it was unintentional, and Alice glanced up, staring hard at him.

"Yes, he has. We were together for twelve years, married for eight, and have a daughter, so yes, it is hard."

Tom grimaced through embarrassment, feeling his cheeks flush. Whatever dark thoughts were in the back of his mind, they'd managed to slip out inadvertently just when he really needed them to stay where they were.

"If there is anything I can do," she said, nursing her drink, her tone softening, "to help with... the investigation, then I will."

Tom thought on it. He wasn't going to be kept in the loop but it wouldn't stop him from helping the team if at all possible.

"It would be handy to know what he was working on recently. Is that something you can help with?"

Her eyebrows knitted as she thought about it.

"Anything he might have said about what he was working on, even the slightest thing might help."

"Is that what you think happened? It's something to do with his work?" She shook her head, a micro expression of anger visible for a fleeting moment.

"Not necessarily, but it's possible. He was an investigative journalist, wasn't he?"

"Yes," she said, her expression taking on a faraway look.

"What is it?"

"Nothing... really," she said, forcing a smile before it faded. "I don't really know what he was working on. Our conversations were largely focussed on Sapphire."

"Okay, well, if anything comes to mind let me know and I'll pass it on."

Alice tilted her head to one side. "Are you not investigating?"

"No. Not this time," he said. Her eyes narrowed and he felt defensive, splaying his hands wide. "It's not my call. I'm a bit too close to this one—"

"To be objective?"

It sounded more like an accusation than a mere question.

"Not quite."

The answer clearly wasn't satisfying and Alice sighed, locking her eyes on his. She glanced away and he thought she rolled her eyes but he couldn't be sure. Lifting her glass, she finished the wine and looked at the bottle.

"That won't help."

It was arguably not the best time to make such a comment because Alice glared at him but didn't respond. Instead, she got up and crossed the kitchen placing the glass in the dishwasher and forcibly closing the door. Taking a deep breath, she ran her tongue across the outside of her lower lip and spoke without looking at him.

"I don't know how long she will sleep, so I'm going up now. I'll sleep in with her tonight."

She turned to leave the kitchen, hovering at the doorway with her back to him. Whether she was waiting for him to speak or considering saying something to him, he didn't know, but the moment passed and she left. He sat there for a few moments feeling the weight of the silence. Alice hadn't wanted his comfort, at least that was how it felt. Then again, maybe physical touch was the last thing she needed and the support of his presence

was enough. Perhaps she was feeling guilt, guilt at being with her lover when her ex-husband was dead. It was possible. Irrational and yet logical.

He chastised himself for making the situation about himself once more. How was she supposed to react? He'd lost people he cared for in the past, everyone had, but to do so in this manner was very different. Touching thumb and index finger to his eyes, he pressed firmly, feeling a release of the pressure in his head. The coming days were going to be trying and he still had the Beckett case to work on. Her loved ones deserved just as much attention as his own.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

---

TOM SLIPPED OUT of the house early, before either Alice or Saffy woke. He felt bad for creeping out, which was exactly what he was doing, but the previous night left him with a sense of unease surrounding the events. He hadn't spoken to Alice again after she went upstairs. He spent a little time trading text messages with Eric, who'd been left with organising the background checks into Mary Beckett's life. It was a lot for him to take on so early in the investigation. Circumstances dictated the need and Eric wasn't one to complain. Quite the opposite. By the time Tom had made his way up to bed, he found both of them asleep. Looking in on them, Alice lay alongside Saffy who had an arm possessively draped across her mother.

The little girl was asleep and Alice appeared to be as well, but Tom knew better. Whenever he was on a difficult case, he found restful sleep to always be tantalisingly out of reach. And since he now spent most of his time here at the house, he would often watch Alice sleeping. Strangely therapeutic, he found watching her calming. She didn't have to make much effort to be beautiful; she was always appealing. At least that's what he saw when he looked upon her. But he also knew when she was faking it. Her eyelids would remain still whereas in sleep they would frequently flutter. When they argued, fortunately on rare occasions, they might retire without a resolution. On those nights Alice would pretend to be asleep in order to avoid further confrontation, or perhaps to annoy him further. In any event, he didn't think she was asleep. He resisted the urge to go in and kiss them both goodnight, which he would normally do. Instead, he went to bed and endured a listless night. Images of dead birds, funerals and the tears of both Saffy and her mum kept repeating in his dreams.



In a way, it was a relief to be heading into the station. The Beckett case would be a welcome distraction. He sent Alice a text message and had left a handwritten note to her in the kitchen, both urging her to call him if she needed anything. It was a lame offer, one that grief-stricken people hear all of the time and it is heartfelt, but ultimately useless. What people need is to know you're there, but as for helping, your thoughts don't offer much. A practical offer is better – I'll take the kids off your hands for a day, I'm going to do your shopping for you. That type of thing is far more useful. Call me if you need to, invariably leads to no such thing. What do you need when you lose someone? More than anything, you need the one thing no one can give you – the person back.

Entering ops, he found Tamara, Cassie and Eric already at their desks. He had to check his watch to make sure it hadn't stopped. It was seven o'clock and they looked to be well underway.

"Good morning," he said.

They all acknowledged him.

"I figured you'd be early. There's a coffee there for you," Tamara said, pointing to a takeaway cardboard cup holder tray with one cup still present. "It'll still be hot."

"Thanks."

Tom picked it up, grateful for the pick-me-up. Tamara came across the room to him, lowering her voice so only the two of them would hear.

"You okay?"

He nodded.

"And how're Alice and Saffy?"

He inclined his head, unsure of what to say. "Not great. Saffy is a resilient kid and Alice... well, she'll hold up well for Saffy's sake, but it's come as a shock."

"Bound to. Poor girl."

Tom presumed she was referring to Saffy.

"Did Alice say anything to you that might prove useful?"

"About Gage's work?"

Tamara nodded.

"No, I'm afraid not. She didn't know what he was working on and I get the impression she's not talked with him much recently."

"Ah, right," Tamara said, smiling. "That's a shame."

"Did you find anything useful in the house?"

Tamara frowned. "Probably best if we don't talk about it."

Tom sipped at his coffee and made little attempt to shield her from his disdain for her comment. She indicated his office behind him and they headed into it. Tom caught sight of Cassie watching them go in the corner of his eye. Tamara walked in first and told him to close the door behind him.

"I know we talked about this briefly yesterday, but maybe we should—"

Tom held up his free hand. "There's no need. I understand."

"Do you?"

"Yes. I can't be close to it but—"

"There is no *but* in this, Tom."

"Am I going to be barred from the ops room as well?" He was being sarcastic and she knew it.

"Of course not, but you can't be involved in the case. The details of the investigation need to..."

The two of them stared at one another, his eyes narrowing as he took in the unspoken intimation in what she was saying.

"I think we know each other well enough to know I'm not a suspect in this case," he said softly. Tamara rolled her eyes. "Ex-husband, new lover... I know it's possible."

"Not with you, no," Tamara said. "It's not that. You're close to it. And it's a matter of perception."

"Only if you think my involvement might be seen to prejudice a case..."

A thought sprang to mind, one he hadn't considered until now. He wouldn't consider it, and maybe that was exactly why he couldn't be involved after all. Tamara was watching him intently. Had she had the same thought, only much sooner?

"Tom?"

Shaking his head, he let the matter drop. It wasn't a question he wanted to ask just yet, fearful of what the answer might be.

"Okay. How are we going to manage this? Two murders, limited resources."

"I figured you and Eric could continue with the Beckett case. Eric's already made progress there," Tamara said, gesturing towards the DC with a flick of her hand. "I'll keep Cassie with me. To have two murders in such close proximity is highly suspicious but, as it stands, there is no visible link,

so we should progress with two separate inquiries until we have cause to change that approach. Unless you disagree?"

Tom frowned. "I agree. One thing I would say is that we have a woman known to be something of an environmental campaigner, with a gift for rubbing people up the wrong way, and then there's the death of an investigative journalist nearby. We can't ignore the possibility of a crossover."

"Is there anything in Beckett's life that puts her in the middle of such an investigation?"

"No, not at all so far," he said.

"Let's keep an open mind on it."

They stepped back into the ops room. Both Eric and Cassie glanced up, clearly trying to see if there was any increase in the tension between the two senior officers. Tom came alongside Eric.

"How have you got on with the list we discussed?"

In the previous night's exchange of information, Eric had gathered a list of names Mary Beckett had had run-ins with over the years. They were still waiting on the autopsy results coming back but he was already confident on the cause of death. And her time in the water would have destroyed any trace evidence left by her assailant. Their best bet was to start knocking on doors, finding out who had motive and ability to kill her and dispose of the body. This was going to be an old-fashioned investigation.

"I have," Eric said. "First on the list we have a repeat offender who found Mary Beckett an ever-present thorn in his side and proverbial pain in the—"

"Name, Eric?"

"Robert Rutland," Eric said, holding up an arrest record and passing it to him.

The photograph was of a slim-faced man with several days' worth of stubble and a few wisps of grey hair standing up on the top of his head. The last vestiges of a hairline clinging on in a losing battle with baldness. The eyes appeared hollow and sunken. No one looks good having just been arrested, but this man looked like an utterly dejected individual.

"Multiple arrests for poaching, fencing of protected species..."

"Just the type of guy who would hate someone like Mary Beckett," Eric said.

"And they've crossed paths before?"

"Repeatedly."

Tom looked at the registered address. It was on the edge of the Royal Sandringham Estate. "Let's go and pay him a visit."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

---

TAMARA WATCHED Tom and Eric leave the ops room. She didn't mean to slap Tom down in front of the team. Inevitably, he was going to hear a great deal about the Gage case. This was unavoidable. He wasn't the type to stick his oar in either. She had absolute respect for him and his professionalism. But she was setting down a marker, and it was for his own good as much for the integrity of the investigation. She knew that he wasn't a realistic suspect. If she didn't know him would she look at him? Probably. When lovers clash with former partners it can easily cross a line but not Tom. Then there was what she hadn't said, and he was experienced enough to have worked it out for himself. Alice was going to be considered. She would have to be.

Did Tom know she was there yesterday? No. He would have said so if he had. Unless there were two women in Adrian Gage's life who drove a red Volkswagen and had a child of a similar age in tow. She'd already made the decision to speak with Alice. It was just a matter of deciding how they went about arranging that. They could invite her to the station for an informal chat or knock on her door with a warrant. The latter would be traumatic, not least for Tom, but that was secondary. The decision would come following the conclusion of the autopsy and the processing of the forensic evidence. She would prefer the latter, and she'd be lying if she said otherwise.

"Where are we with determining what Gage was working on?" Tamara asked, picking up her coffee. It was lukewarm now, but she quite liked cold coffee.

"Still can't get into his laptop," Cassie said without taking her eyes from the screen in front of her. "It's encrypted. I was hoping for biometrics, a

fingerprint scanner or facial recognition because we can get around that easily enough."

It was true, they could. They had Adrian Gage, even though the requirements would be a little gruesome.

"Can we bypass it?"

Cassie shrugged. "Maybe we could send it down to Norwich and let the boffins have a look but I'm hopeful."

"You think you can crack it?"

Cassie laughed. "Don't be daft. Of course not, but let's face it, we all make a note of our passwords somewhere just in case, don't we?"

"We're not supposed to do that."

"But we do," Cassie said, looking up and smiling at her. "You can't have your niece's birthday as your password all the time. At some point you're going to have to come up with something more complicated. And when you do, you will write it down."

"Just need to know where it's written down."

"Exactly," Cassie said.

"And do you?"

"Well, no."

Tamara sighed. "Otherwise, a solid plan. What do we have then?"

"Contents of the bag," Cassie said, standing up and moving across to a board on the wall. "Looking in his notebook, which seems to cover multiple stories across a varied timescale. I'll say one thing for Mr Gage, he's certainly organised. From his handwriting to his date stamps and note taking – he's a dream to follow. It's just a shame that the bulk of the detail is probably logged on the computer. What we have in his notebook is a memory map of sorts."

"A *to do* and *don't forget* list?" Tamara asked.

"My thoughts exactly."

"So, where's he been and who's he looking into?"

"I've broken it down into names of people, places and businesses," Cassie said, pointing out three lists on the board. "The highlights of interest so far are three local councillors, all of them still sitting. I checked. The CEO of a local building firm. Not a little two or three a year builder, but interests in major sites. Multi-million-pound ventures spanning East Anglia in its entirety."

"Interesting," Tamara said, coming to stand alongside her. "Didn't Gage scoop an award for uncovering corruption in local government?"

"Yes, that's right. He uncovered a trail of dirty money passing between developers and local government officials by way of lavish trips abroad. That type of thing. The suggestion was that this was influencing planning decisions to be more favourable towards extending development boundaries of local towns. It caused a bit of a stink at the time, led to a number of resignations and two criminal trials."

"Do you think he was onto something similar again?"

"If it was going on, then he was the guy to find it," Cassie said. "Might have to wait until we get into the laptop for confirmation, though. He also had a copy of a local Ordnance Survey map in the bag, with a number of locations circled."

Cassie returned to her desk and unfolded the map. There were a half dozen locations circled with a red pen. All of them were on or close to the coast. Numbers were scribbled at the edge of the circles, but what they were referring to was unclear. Tamara indicated them.

"Any ideas?"

Cassie shook her head. "No, not yet. They could be proposed building sites, or ones they hoped to get permission for."

"Most of them look well outside of any existing settlement boundary, as far as I can see. Worth looking into. Anything else?"

"There is another name, or two names to be exact, but he only references one in his notes. Michael Rowe and, by association, his brother Les."

"And who are they?" Tamara asked, finishing her coffee and heading across the room to put the cup in the bin.

"A few years back, the Rowe brothers ran a business providing services to the public sector. Anything from waste management to school meals. They were big players in Norfolk's public-sector contracts. If something was up for tender, they were right at the top of the list."

Tamara perched herself on the edge of the desk and folded her arms across her chest, listening intently.

"Go on."

"Well, a few years back, Adrian Gage started looking into these contracts. I don't know how he got wind of it, but there seemed to be something fishy going on with how the contracts were awarded."

"Corruption again?"

"Yes, for starters," Cassie said. "To cut a long story short, Gage got inside and the tendering process wasn't the only thing going on. Seemingly they had a number of staff on the books who didn't exist. There were salaries being paid for people who no longer worked for the companies the Rows operated, pension scheme contributions... it was a drop in the ocean. They were billing for services over and above what they were contracted for, a clause regarding *exceeding contractual services*."

"Necessary services over and above what they'd already been paid for?"

"Correct. Obviously this stuff was charged at a far higher rate and was lucrative. Well, seemingly there was a paper trail for what they did, but it turned out they weren't doing it or not to the degree they claimed."

"Dress it up any way you like but it's still fraud."

"Exactly. And a complex one at that. None of it related to huge numbers, but when you put it all together, then it added up to serious money."

Tamara drew a deep breath, her brow furrowing. "And Gage exposed this?"

"Yes. It put a lot of noses out of joint. Reading between the lines it looks like much of the detail was kept quiet and they tried to keep things in house —"

"Swept under the carpet, you mean."

Cassie smiled. "Yeah. But Gage hit the nationals with that one. The tabloids love a government scandal after all."

"What happened to the Rows?"

"Michael was the chief financial officer and ultimately the weight of evidence came down on him. He got six years, partly down to his lacklustre efforts in helping track down the money."

"He moved it on, buried it?"

"That was the working theory. Once the funds passed through several accounts out of the country it became harder to find."

"And the brother?"

"Two years suspended."

"He got lucky."

"The CPS couldn't find enough evidence to prove he knew what was going on, as hard as it might seem to believe for the investigating officers



and the barrister on behalf of the prosecution. But that's the way it goes sometimes."

"Presumably this was years ago?" Tamara asked, and Cassie confirmed it. "So why is Michael popping up in his notebook now?"

"I ran a check. Both of the Rows are back living in the area. Michael served two thirds of his six before being released. Had he pleaded guilty, then he would have got half the sentence and with good behaviour could well have been out after eighteen months. As it was, he served just over four. The last two years were served in an open prison where he had frequent day-release opportunities, so wasn't considered a danger."

"No, financial criminals seldom are."

"Right. He was paroled a month ago. The Rows lost everything. The parent company folded after they were stripped of all their contracts. Can't be easy starting again in your early sixties. There would likely be a lot of animosity stored up in there. Seemingly at his sentencing hearing, Gage attended and Michael lost the plot. He threatened to find Gage when he got out and that the latter wouldn't see him coming."

"Four years to stoke the fire of revenge," Tamara said. "It's a theory. Do you think Gage would invite him into his home, though? And if he did, allow him the opportunity to attack him?"

"Worth asking."

"Definitely," Tamara said. "Do we have an address for the two of them?"

"Yes. Michael is living in Heacham whereas Les has a place on the outskirts of Sheringham."

"Great. Maybe we should swing by Michael's place and see if he still bears a grudge."

"So, erm..." Cassie said as she picked up her jacket from the back of her chair, looping it over her head and putting it on, "is Tom okay?"

"Yes, of course. Why do you ask?"

Cassie shrugged. "Just the girlfriend being a... person of interest and all that. Could be disconcerting."

Tamara frowned. It wasn't a conversation she wanted to have but it couldn't be avoided forever.

"I haven't confirmed that to him yet." Cassie raised her eyebrows, over-emphasising her surprise. "But I'm pretty sure he already knows. I want to wait until forensics come back before we speak to Alice."

"Understandable."

"You disagree?"

"Not necessarily."

"But?"

"Well, if she has trace evidence on her clothing, then—"

"I'm aware of it, okay?"

Cassie tilted her head to one side. Clearly it wasn't okay, but she chose not to push.

"I'm not going to treat her any differently. Not for Tom's sake or anyone else's. We'll speak to her when the time's right. Understood?"

"Absolutely," Cassie said. "Michael Rowe?"

"Michael Rowe."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

---

TOM WAS happy to allow Eric to drive. His restless night's sleep left him with a dull ache in his head that he thought would only grow if he had to focus on the road. Besides, Eric knew the area better than he did. As a child, he had fond memories of the country park that made up the Sandringham Estate, the queen's Royal country residence. Not that he'd ever seen any of the royals personally. The family would gather there every summer at some point, but the estate was more than two hundred-and forty-hectares encompassing forest trails and open parkland. It was a place locals and tourists alike gravitated to, particularly if the coast was taking a hammering from the North Sea winds or if you needed shelter from the burning sun. The designated forest trails offered shelter from both.

But he hadn't been this way for many years. Momentarily, his thoughts drifted to his late parents. Sandringham was somewhere they all used to enjoy visiting. His mother's love of nature, his father's love of open space and his childhood self, enjoying the freedom to charge around and generally make as much noise as he liked without being hushed.

His phone rang. It was the pathologist's office and he answered, a little disappointed to be drawn away from his memories.

"Tom, I'm sorry I haven't been back to you with my findings. I know you asked for preliminary thoughts yesterday, but the autopsy threw up some rather unexpected details and I'm yet to work through them."

"I thought the cause of death was already determined with a reasonable degree of certainty?"

"Oh, yes. That is true, and I won't be altering that."

"Then what is the complication?"

"I would prefer to say when I've obtained copies of the deceased's medical records, rather than speculate."

Tom found that a little odd but maybe there was something that needed clarifying. He was going to press him, but then thought better of it. He wouldn't appreciate a pathologist questioning the process of a murder investigation, so, in turn, he shouldn't assume a better working knowledge of a pathology department.

"Okay. When do you expect to have the information you need on Mary Beckett?"

"Later on, today."

"Will you call me again as soon as you're up to speed?"

"Certainly."

Tom put his mobile back in his pocket, intrigued as to what was holding back the release of the autopsy report, but that was for later. Eric glanced across at him.

"Bad news?"

He shook his head. "Not really. Delay on the Beckett autopsy conclusions."

"I figured that was a dead cert – if you pardon the pun. Death either resulted from the blow to the head or by drowning once she went into the water."

"I suspect that will still be the case," Tom said.

Eric slowed the car as they came upon a junction. It wasn't a major intersection, more of a short track leading to a row of terraced cottages set back from the main road. Eric pulled the car in and came to a stop.

"It's one of these, but I don't know which," he said, leaning forward and peering over the dashboard at the properties.

They were intriguing. Each one looked identical to the next and were probably inspired by or built during the Arts and Crafts Victorian period. The exterior of each house demonstrated an impressive example of craftsmanship, using wood and clay to highlight traditional skills and natural building materials. The roof pitches were low with overhanging eaves and many of the windowpanes were patterned or coloured. None of the cottages were numbered, each bearing a name plate etched into slate.

"What do we know about Rutland?" Tom asked.

"A well-documented history of poaching. Multiple fines and convictions once the legislation was tightened on endangered species," Eric

said, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. "Mary Beckett's photographic evidence and eyewitness testimony had him directly convicted on one occasion and they've had other run-ins along the way too."

"Anything recent?"

"Last year. Does that count?" Eric said, looking across at him.

"Let's see what he has to say for himself."

Each house was well presented, in keeping with the architectural design. To the front of each property was a small square garden, each one encompassed by a knee-high picket fence. Clearly a great deal of time was spent on cultivating them because the season's foliage was really beginning to come out, transitioning from spring to summer. That is in all but one. The last cottage in the terrace stood out from the others, and it was the one they were heading for.

Tom recognised the picket fence was made out of cedar, a good choice to withstand the elements. However, the last property appeared to have forgone the maintenance required to keep it in good shape. Many of the staves were rotten, some missing entirely, and the garden was largely overgrown. Several bushes had grown so high and wide they were now covering half of the front-facing window behind them. Where the neighbouring properties showed a level of care and attention to cultivating their gardens this one was allowing nature to take its course. Some of the clay tiles on the roof had slipped and in one corner near the gable eaves a hole had appeared, roughly a foot wide. The timbers in view were greying and blackened. It must have been exposed like that for quite some time.

The path to the front door had plants, bushes and grass encroaching from either side. So much so that they had to push some aside to enable them to reach the front door unimpeded. There was no doorbell, and Tom hammered on the frame with his fist, hearing the thud resonate. They waited, but no one came to the door. Stepping back, Tom eyed the upstairs windows. Heavy nets hung behind the panes, but the curtains were open. Movement to their left caught his eye. A woman was peering at them from the front window of a neighbouring property.

Normally, he would have crossed the gap between them to identify himself, but the route was impenetrable. In front of him brambles rose from the undergrowth with both blackberries and raspberries visible. Taking out his ID, he brandished his warrant card. The woman's eyes narrowed as she

inspected it, and then she opened the window. It was a narrow casement and the gap wasn't large. She almost had to shout to be heard.

"He'll not answer the door to you. Never does. You'll have to go around the back."

There was nothing amiable about her tone. Her expression remained fixed. Something told him the residents didn't get on.

"Thank you," he called, nodding his thanks and smiling.

"He leaves the gate unlocked but mind his dog. Vicious animal."

With that, she closed the window and disappeared behind her own intricately woven net curtain. Tom and Eric exchanged glances.

"Vicious dog," Eric said quietly. "Never liked dogs."

"Why ever not?" Tom asked, passing the younger man and setting off around to the rear.

"I watched that series of satanic films when I was a kid. You remember, the one with the creepy boy and his pudding basin haircut. He was always flanked by Dobermans."

"*The Omen*?" Tom asked over his shoulder.

Eric hurried to catch up with him. "Yeah. Scared the living daylights out of me. Made me not want to go to church with Mum that weekend either."

Tom frowned. "I thought in the end it was all about good triumphing over evil?"

"Yes, well, evil did a pretty good job of having its own way, as I recall. Maybe they got him in the sequel, but I wasn't going to watch it."

Tom shook his head as they approached the side gate. "It's a good job we joined the police to stop such things then, isn't it? Tell you what, if the dog's possessed, then I'll take the lead, okay?"

"I don't think you'll be much use against the second coming," Eric grumbled with a half-smile. "I have faith in your abilities, but that might be pushing it."

Tom laughed, trying the latch on the gate and finding it unlocked as the neighbour had said. The gate and adjoining fence to the rear was at head height. Tom wondered if there was some residential stipulation in the terrace that the front of the properties must be maintained in identical fashion, keeping the same windows, fence heights and so on. At the rear, these rules were waived. The garden was much the same at the back as the front. Overgrown to such an extent that you could barely see the fence panels marking the boundary. The path to the rear door was passable

though, probably being the main door used by the occupant to come and go by.

"Ah... bloody hell!" Eric said.

Tom looked round to see Eric steadying himself by holding the gate post with his left hand and examining the sole of his right shoe.

"What?"

"I've trodden in dog sh—"

The rear door was yanked open and a man appeared, scowling.

"You're trespassing!"

Tom smiled, withdrawing his warrant card from his pocket once again, holding it aloft.

"Robert Rutland?"

"What of it?" he asked, maintaining his expression.

"We'd like a word. May we come inside?"

Rutland eyed him up and down. Then he turned to Eric, currently busy wiping his foot in the long grass growing to the side of the gate.

"He'd better not stink my house out with that," Rutland said, disappearing back inside.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

---

TOM FOLLOWED Robert Rutland into the house with Eric carrying out another couple of sweeping passes of his foot in the long grass before he, too, entered the property. The cottage was deceptively spacious on the inside. The low pitch and overhanging eaves implied the house would be small, compact and with low ceilings. The reality was far from it. Although room dimensions were generous, the kitchen they were standing in was cluttered. The sink was full of dirty crockery with a saucepan balancing precariously at the top of the stack, half filled with water and a dried brown residue lining the sides. Every inch of space on the worktops was filled by used plates and bowls, unsealed food packets and vegetables. Many of the latter were almost unidentifiable, having turned black or discoloured and grown mould spores to such a degree that a CSI tech would struggle to name them.

There was an unrecognisable smell in the air, also stale and unpleasant, which snagged at the back of your nose and mouth. It was a lingering odour that triggered the senses. The irony of Eric having to clean his shoes before entering was not lost on Tom. Rutland stood in the centre of the kitchen, hands on hips.

"Do you want a cup of tea?"

"No, thank you," Tom said. A battalion from the Parachute Regiment couldn't force him to eat or drink in this place. Not without booster vaccinations first.

"In that case, we don't need to stay in the kitchen. Damned depressing being in here, right enough."



Rutland led them out of the kitchen and into the rear sitting room. The change of location did little to improve their surroundings. The room had a dining table and six chairs at its centre. An open fireplace was set into one wall and a picture rail delineated the change in colour scheme. Below the rail the walls were a dark shade of crimson and above would once have been white or possibly cream but was now yellowed by wood smoke and, judging by the smell in the air, frequent use of a pipe. Tom's grandfather, on his mother's side, used to smoke a pipe and it was a distinctive aroma. Unfortunately, here that familiar smell was intermixed with something very different.

Rutland sat down at the head of the table, producing a leather pouch of tobacco and looking around for something, frowning.

"Where's that damn pipe?"

Claws scraping on the wooden floorboards announced the arrival of the dog. Eric need not have worried. It was a Golden Retriever, not a breed known for its aggression, and it was clearly aged. The animal moved with almost robotic movements of the hips, its tongue hanging out and panting hard with the exertion of movement. The dog flopped down on a bed in the far corner, paying the visitors no attention whatsoever.

"Poor girl," Rutland said, noticing Tom watching the dog. "With her cataracts, she probably can't even see you. Lost her sense of smell years ago, too. What with the arthritis, she probably won't make it through another winter."

Rutland got up again, searching the room with his eyes. It was no surprise that he couldn't find anything. The room was packed with freestanding furniture, laden with dust-covered books, newspapers and magazines. There were several glass-fronted display cabinets and shelving around the room dedicated to wild birds. In the cabinets were stuffed birds; evidently a process done years ago because many of them were visibly deteriorating. On the shelves were glass display domes, some containing more birds and others with eggs placed inside nests, much as they might be found in the wild.

He found his pipe on a stack of books alongside the dog's bed. Before returning to the table, he bent over and scratched behind the dog's right ear. She leaned into him, appreciating the gesture.

"Not long now, eh, old girl?" he said, before righting himself and coming back to his seat. He also seemed to be suffering in the same way as

his pet, coming back to his seat with the pipe in one hand and an ashtray in the other. "So, what do you want?"

He didn't offer either Tom or Eric a seat. With the questionable hygiene on display, Tom thought that was probably for the best.

"We're investigating a murder," Tom said.

Rutland glanced up at him and then continued packing tobacco into his pipe. "That body found out at Blakeney?"

"You heard about it?"

"Of course I have. Just because I can't abide being around people it doesn't mean I'm deaf," he said. "What's that got to do with me?"

"You've had issues with the victim in the past."

That got his attention. Rutland stopped what he was doing, gently placed the pipe on the table and inclined his head to one side, fixing Tom with an inquisitive look.

"Who?"

"You fall out with a lot of people?"

"One or two," Rutland said, his face splitting a grin that revealed yellow teeth along with a few blackened stumps and receding gums.

"Mary Beckett."

Rutland sank back in his chair, placing both hands, palms down, on the surface of the table. The grin faded and he slowly bobbed his head forwards.

"Old Mary was done for, was she? Can't say I'll miss the old cow."

"Not nice to speak ill of the dead," Eric said softly, moving about the room.

Rutland's eyes flicked briefly towards Eric, but he didn't comment directly, looking back at Tom.

"Fair's fair. She would be pretty pleased to see the back of me too," he said, sneering. "I'll go to my grave happy knowing I outlasted the old witch."

"We gathered the two of you didn't see eye to eye," Tom said.

Rutland's eyes were trained on Eric, who was now leaning closer to one of the glass domes, raising a pointed finger to trace the detail of the contents. "Don't you be touching my collection, boy!" he said. Eric looked over his shoulder, raised an eyebrow, and then diplomatically retreated from the display case. "It's all legal."

"That's not always been the case though, has it?" Tom said.

"That was all a long time ago. Given that type of thing up for good." He waved his arms around, a gesture to encompass the room's contents. "Everything here was assembled prior to the law changes. I'm allowed to keep them. Anything that came after was taken away from me. Incinerated, too, I expect. Damn waste of fine specimens."

"Perhaps if you'd left them in the wild, there would be more there to see," Tom countered. "Then incineration wouldn't have been necessary."

Rutland shrugged, a gesture accompanied by a monosyllabic grunt.

"Mary Beckett had you prosecuted, didn't she?"

"Don't mean I killed her though, does it," Rutland said. "As if I'd kill her over a few eggs and a fine. You must be short of ideas if you're bothering me!" He chuckled as he said the last. His confidence was obvious. He'd had dealings with the law before, and he felt he was on solid ground here.

"What was the cause of the crossed words you had with her last year?"

Rutland sat forward, gathering up his pipe and setting about stuffing it once again. His brow furrowed as he continued and Tom waited for a reply. Once he was satisfied with it, he sat back and struck a match. Puffing on the end of his pipe, he sent a cloud of sweet, grey smoke into the air which filled the room. Eric scrunched up his face, clearly uncomfortable.

"Allegations," Rutland said, pipe in his mouth. "Always making allegations, that one. Like I said, I'm clean. Have been for ages. But that doesn't stop an old busy body like Mary Beckett. Always got to have a cause. Always got to be nipping at somebody's heels. If it wasn't me, it would be another." He took his pipe from his mouth and wagged it towards Tom suggestively. "No safe space for any of us. That's what you call it these days, isn't it, a safe space?"

Tom was pretty sure the context was different, but he smiled politely.

"Besides, you're barking up the wrong tree. If anything, I should be raising a complaint against her."

"Is that so?"

Rutland got up, placing his pipe in the ashtray and moving to a cabinet to his left. He moved aside a stack of magazines, old copies of an ornithology publication by the look of it. They were precariously placed and fell over, spilling to the floor, but Rutland ignored them. Eric moved to help pick them up but was waved away. Opening one of the drawers, Rutland took out a clutch of papers. They were little more than handwritten notes on pages torn from a spiral-bound book. He forced them into Tom's

hands before returning to his seat, sighing at the effort required to have done so.

Tom placed the papers down on the table. They were in a disorganised pile, unsurprisingly. They looked as if they'd been written by the same hand. Some of them were damaged by water, the ink having run. They were all short, abusive and aggressive. Tom flicked through them. One stated *I'll tell everyone you're a paedophile* which was a recurring theme along with demands for him to stop. Another implied Rutland was a secret homosexual. Tom indicated for Eric to have a look and the DC came closer. Tom turned to Rutland.

"These were all meant for you?"

Rutland nodded.

"And you think it was Mary Beckett who left them?"

"Everywhere I would go. Sometimes pushed through my letterbox... other times left pinned to my gate post or on my Landy, tucked under the windscreen wiper in the supermarket car park."

"How can you be sure it was her?"

Rutland laughed, but it was a sound without genuine humour.

"She'd say exactly the same thing to my face. The woman wasn't shy, you know."

"And what was it she wanted you to stop doing?"

He splayed his hands wide, shaking his head. "Like I said. Allegations. That woman needed an enemy, something or someone to focus on. She damn well accused me of stalking her! Can you believe that? Me, harassing her when it was her who wouldn't leave me alone."

Tom absently rubbed at his chin with his forefinger and thumb, casting a sideways glance at Eric.

"Did you? Harass her?" Tom asked, fixing Rutland with a stare.

He sat forward, resting his elbows on the table in front of him and drawing himself upright. "I'm many things, both now and in the past, but I'm not a danger to women, Inspector Janssen. Not now and not then." He sat back, relaxing and rolling his tongue across the inside of his cheek. "Even if she was a bloody awful woman."

"You know these notes give you a motive, don't you?" Tom said.

"If so, then I'd be unlikely to pass them to you if I'd done her in, would I?"

There was logic to the point.

"I would like to take these with me, if you don't mind?"

Rutland focussed on Tom, there was distrust in his expression. "Why would you want to do that?"

"If only to analyse the handwriting to see if it was Mary who left them for you. If so, then it points to her state of mind. The type of things she got up to. It could help lead us to her killer." Tom watched the man intently. Rutland held the eye contact, unflinching. "What do you say?"

"Take them."

"Thank you. Just one more thing, Mr Rutland. Where were you the night before last?"

Rutland looked to the ceiling, his mouth open as he thought about it.

"Here, mostly. I took the old girl out for her evening walk around seven, but the weather wasn't nice. Then we came back."

"You can't have made it far," Eric said, looking at the dog lying in the bed. "I mean, she doesn't look like walking would be her thing anymore."

"True enough. We were only out for a half hour, tops. And no, before you ask, I didn't see or speak with anyone who can confirm it. Unless Mrs Nosey next door saw me come and go."

Tom smiled. "What is it with her and your dog?"

"She mentioned that did she?"

Tom nodded.

"Goes back years. She caught her taking a pee on her alliums... didn't care for it and tried to shoo my girl away with a rake. Dogs don't like that much."

"Did she bite her?" Eric asked.

Rutland shook his head. "A growl is more than enough for that one. I think she's more scared of dogs than you are, young man."

"Who says I'm scared of dogs?" Eric didn't sound like he could convince himself, let alone anyone else.

"Thank you for your time, Mr Rutland," Tom said, as Eric gathered the notes together and produced a folded-up evidence bag from his pocket.

"If you're looking for someone who Beckett fell out with, it wouldn't hurt for you to take a look at Daniel Crowe. If anyone had it in for her, then it was him."

Tom assessed the suggestion. Was it an attempt at distraction or an expression of civic duty from a man who had never done so in the past? Rutland appeared to read Tom's scepticism well.

"Don't take my word for it. The two of them were going at it outside the Blakeney Village Hall a while back."

"What was going on?"

"I don't know. Some community gathering. Plenty of people saw it, not just me."

"What were they arguing about?"

Rutland shrugged. "Beats me. But he was mighty angry when he left, and Mary looked very pleased with herself."

Tom smiled. "We'll look into it."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

---

TAMARA GREAVE LOOKED around the complex as they walked. The residences were arranged in a U shape around a central garden. The beds were well tended and flowers were in bloom. A number of faces could be seen peering out at them from windows on both the ground and first floors. The buildings were flat-roofed and clad in white boards. From a distance they looked wooden but as they walked around them it was obvious they were plastic. Easy maintenance.

"Ever get the feeling you're being watched?" Cassie said under her breath.

She smiled. "New faces will always raise an eyebrow or two."

"True enough."

They were in a warden-controlled development, a halfway house between a care home and private residences. Nothing around them was ostentatious. The grounds were pleasant but functional with an outdoor seating area located in places of shade. Passing a wooden bench, it looked rotten and in need of painting. The cladding on the properties also had a build-up of dark green residue in patches, often confined to the north-facing sides, those that stayed out of the sun. Tamara counted perhaps eight residences, imagining them to be self-contained apartments and occupied by single people rather than couples.

Michael Rowe lived in a ground-floor unit. They came to the door and Tamara rang the bell. To the left of them was a set of patio doors which opened directly onto the communal garden. The threshold was set at the same height on the inside and out, thereby making it safer and easier for the occupant to make use of it. Someone was inside, Tamara could see him

through the window in the corner of her eye. Cassie went to press the button again but she stopped her.

"He's coming."

It took a while. A figure appeared on the other side of the door, visible through the obscured glass. He was shuffling forward and the process of unlocking the door took a while. A pale-faced man peered out at them through the gap. Having read his file, Tamara was quite shocked at the physical appearance of the man. He was tall, probably taller even than Tom Janssen, but he stood in front of them stooped over, one hand gripping the door handle as if it was all that kept him upright. His head was now at Tamara's level.

"Mr Rowe?" Tamara asked, brandishing her identification. "DCI Greave and—"

"Police. Yes, I guessed as much," he said, eyeing the two of them suspiciously. "She's spot on," he said, indicating Cassie with his free hand. The skin was drawn across a bony and skeletal hand. "You're not what I'd expect to see, though."

Tamara was surprised. "What would you expect, Mr Rowe?"

"Police officers are like middle managers these days," he said. "Mind you, maybe you're dressed like they do in the offices of these new tech-based businesses. They're not bothered about convention either." His speech became halting, as if he was struggling to catch his breath. "You'd better come in, if you want to speak to me."

He turned and began the slow shuffle back into the interior, leaving Tamara to push the door open. She glanced at Cassie as they entered.

"What's wrong with how I dress?"

Cassie smiled but didn't comment. Of all the things ever said to her by witnesses, suspects or criminals, no one had ever mentioned her choice of clothing before. They followed Rowe into his living room. Tamara was right, she could see a bedroom and bathroom off the entrance hall and a small kitchenette was attached to the one reception room overlooking the garden.

She waited patiently for him to ease himself back into his armchair. He offered them both a seat, there was a choice of another faded green corduroy recliner or a wooden chair pushed under a small round table. Cassie chose to remain standing and Tamara perched herself on the recliner next to their host. Now that she had more than the narrow gap to view him,



she took in his measure. He was indeed very tall and thin. His hair was thin and combed over in a classic attempt to hide his baldness but it was so obvious as to be comical. His skin tone was pale across all visible parts of his body, with some dark brown patches on his forehead and the backs of his hands. They could be natural and formed from birth but he may have spent a lot of time in the sun. The tips of his fingers were blue which was a symptom she'd never come across aside from someone suffering from acute frostbite.

"Mr Rowe, we're investi—"

He held up his hand, his brow furrowing as he reached down to the left of his chair. There was a large magazine holder next to him and between that and the chair Tamara caught sight of some transparent plastic tubes. Rowe pulled up an oxygen mask, placing it across his mouth and nose and drawing deeply. Tamara saw the tubes connected to a canister similar in size to a domestic kitchen fire extinguisher. After a few moments, Rowe released the mask from his face and placed it in his lap. His eyelids fluttered and his expression softened.

"What can I do for you, Detective?"

"We're investigating a murder, Mr Rowe, and thought you might be able to help."

"I don't think I'm... in a condition to kill anyone," he said, smiling weakly and still struggling to breathe. "Should I be under caution?"

"Not unless you think it's necessary, Mr Rowe. We're here looking at background."

"I see. You can't blame me for checking."

Tamara couldn't help but think he appeared older than his years. The notion that he had somehow overpowered or attacked Adrian Gage was fanciful.

"How well do you know Adrian Gage?"

"Well enough," he snorted. "Better than I wish to, let's say that. Why do you ask?"

"Mr Gage has been murdered."

Rowe stared straight into Tamara's eye, without blinking, he held her gaze.

"Stuck his nose into the wrong person's affairs, did he?"

"What makes you say that Mr Rowe?" Tamara asked, keeping her tone neutral.

"That's what he does, isn't it? Sticks his nose in, roots around and flings as much dirt as possible to get maximum attention."

"He was an investigative journalist."

"And a damn good one," Rowe said, wagging a finger at her pointedly. It was a comment conveying a sense of admiration which she found odd. Judging by the look on Cassie's face, it hadn't gone unnoticed with her either. "What? I'm not allowed to show him respect for his work?"

"You lost a lot because of Gage and his work," Tamara said.

"And I deserved everything that came my way, young lady." Rowe placed his hands together in his lap, interlocking his fingers. "He caught me bang to rights. Fair's fair."

"You don't hold a grudge?"

Rowe laughed, a sound that was interrupted by a gasp for breath only to then morph into a hacking cough. He reached for his oxygen mask again, drawing heavily on it and waving away Tamara's concerns as she tried to find out if he was all right. He gathered himself together after a few seconds, exhaling with a sigh.

"Lots of grudges," he said quietly. "As a result of his work I lost everything. My business, my wife and ultimately my liberty! If he's dead... don't ask me to shed a tear for him. Because I won't. It doesn't mean I wanted to see him dead, mind you. I appreciate life more these days." He held his oxygen mask in the air in front of him, nodding to it. "Believe me."

"The investigation into your business took place six or seven years ago. Can you think of any reason why Mr Gage would be looking into you or your affairs more recently?"

"As a matter of fact, he came to see me."

Tamara and Cassie exchanged a glance, Tamara thinking hard.

"Why would he do that?" she asked, cocking her head to the side.

Rowe shook his head. "He said it was for a follow-up story. To see where things ended up a few years down the line but, to be honest, I don't think there was any mileage in it."

"Why not?"

"Convicted fraudster serves his time and comes out to die alone in mediocre, albeit friendly, sheltered housing... not much interest... in that story, I should imagine."

"When did he visit you?"

Rowe thought about it. "It's hard. The days seem to merge into one another since I've been here. It was recent, though. Two or three weeks ago, perhaps."

"And he wanted to interview you."

Rowe frowned; an expression accompanied by an almost imperceptible shake of the head. "Just to talk, I think. Mull over old times, maybe."

Tamara wasn't convinced and her expression must have shown it. Rowe smiled. There didn't appear to be deception in the look.

"I know you will find it hard to understand, Detective Inspector, but I hold no malice towards Mr Gage. He wrote to me once, long after the trial was complete."

"What for?"

Rowe shrugged. "I'm not sure. He had no need to. I got the impression he took no pleasure in ruining my life or bringing down the company, which it inevitably did. A lot of people lost their jobs which, at the time, with the economy being what it was, meant it was a tough time for our former employees. He regretted that, I think. Not that it was his fault. It was mine." He took another deep inhale through his mask. "He just did his job. It was such a shame for me that he was so good at it. We would be very unlikely friends, there's no doubt about that but I really wouldn't wish harm on him or anyone else. I paid my debt, served my time. Now, I just want to live in peace for whatever time I have left."

"Please feel free not to answer this question if you'd prefer, but what is the nature of your condition?"

"Chronic obstructive..." He stopped to reach for the mask again, this time taking a half dozen inhalations before trying to speak again. His words, and his breaths, came in agonisingly short bursts. "...pulmonary disease..." His eyes glazed over. "And old age, of course. My doctor puts me in the severe category. I'd hate to be there when they add the word very before that."

Tamara tried to remember the details in his file. She recalled he would be in his sixties now. Hardly an old man but to look at him you might be forgiven for thinking he was thirty years older.

"Do you see much of your brother these days?"

Rowe lifted his mask, closing his eyes as he breathed. The mask clouded over with each exhalation. On this occasion his breathing hadn't

been as ragged and she wondered whether the action was to delay answering the question, to buy him thinking time.

"What do you want from Les?" he asked eventually.

"Well, he lost out too, didn't he?"

The legs of a chair scraping across a wooden floor carried from the unit above. Rowe cast his eyes to the ceiling, grumbling.

"To think I have to see out my days listening to him."

Tamara looked up as well. "Friend of yours?"

Rowe ignored the question. "I don't see much of my brother anymore. He and I... he sees me as the family albatross around his neck."

"Blood is thicker than water. Isn't that what they say?"

"Harrumph," Rowe said, shaking his head. Tamara wondered if Les had been telling the truth all along about being kept in the dark as to what his brother was up to with the company finances. Then again, there was still enough to convict him. "He's running boat trips out of Blakeney."

"What type of trips?" Tamara asked, making a note.

"Seal watching, I think. Apparently it's popular with the tourists. There are a number of people doing them now."

"Which one is his?"

Rowe chuckled before it turned into a deep, throaty laugh and ended in another hacking cough.

"The boat with the hole in it, I should think."

Tamara smiled politely at the joke, flicking her eyes to Cassie who rolled hers.

Thanking him for his time, they let themselves out. Michael Rowe was pleased not to have to see them to the door, instead he asked Tamara to pass him the television remote so that he could catch his favourite daytime quiz show. Cassie pulled the front door closed and they set off back to the car. Passing the patio doors, Tamara glanced in but Rowe showed no interest in them as they left. The same couldn't be said for the other residents. Word of their presence must have spread because there seemed to be twice as many eyes on them as they walked out than when they arrived.

"What do you think?" Cassie asked as they walked.

"Not sure. I mean, he's plausible enough with what he says."

"Most convicted fraudsters I've ever nicked usually are."

Tamara smiled. "That's true. But do you see him stabbing Adrian Gage to death. Perhaps landing one blow but two or three without retaliation? I'm

not so sure."

"He'd be the last person you'd think capable, for sure. Maybe Gage didn't see him as a threat. I didn't read anything about his medical condition in his file."

Tamara considered that. "Do you think he's laying it on? You could fake the need for oxygen to a degree but did you see the state of his fingers? And his skin colour? You can't fake that. Besides, he doesn't exactly move like a gazelle, does he? And how would he even get there? Someone will have seen him trying to leave Gage's place, and did you see how he reacted when speaking to us. Any increase in stress and his breathing became difficult. Imagine how stressful killing a man would be, even if you've spent four or five years thinking about how much you want to do it."

"So, not our guy then."

"I wouldn't rule him out yet."

"Doubts?" Cassie asked just as they reached the car. Tamara looked across to her, placing her hands together on the roof of the car.

"Do you see Adrian Gage dropping by for a cosy follow-up chat, having been the reason he got the man sent down for a stretch?" She drummed her fingers on the metal. Cassie inclined her head.

"No. Not really."

"Me neither," Tamara said, unlocking the doors. Her phone rang and she turned away from the car to answer the call as Cassie got in. "DCI Greave."

"Tamara, it's Tim Paxton, I'm sending my report over to you on the Gage murder but thought you'd like the highlights."

"Thank you, Dr Paxton. I would," Tamara said, bending down and signalling with her fingers to Cassie that she'd be two minutes. Cassie nodded, reaching for her own mobile. "Go ahead."

"It was as you concluded at the scene. Death came as the result of three stab wounds to the chest, one of which pierced the heart. Death was pretty much guaranteed at that point bearing in mind how far the victim was from the nearest hospital. It would not have taken long for him to collapse from the wound. I've recorded the official time of death at approximately 5:30pm."

"Is that why, in your opinion, there was no sign of a struggle on the victim's body?"

"Most probable, yes. There were no signs of further trauma, aside from a bruise to the right side of the head. Judging by the nature of the bruising

and the crime scene photographs, I think this would have been a result of the victim falling to the ground rather than being seen as evidence of an altercation. There wouldn't have been much time for him to have put up a defence, spirited or otherwise. The adrenalin surge will have kept him going for a time as the body recognised his position and tried to compensate, but the inevitable will have followed soon enough."

"Right, okay," Tamara said, folding one hand across her stomach and turning her back to the breeze, wishing she'd fastened her coat. What was happening with this weather? Things were supposed to be warming, not the other way around. "What did you make of the fibres, the ones found under his fingernails?"

"Oh yes, that's right. Bear with me." She heard rustling paper as the pathologist looked for the document. "Right... the blue fibres were a woollen, cashmere mix. My guess from a jumper or a summer coat, perhaps. Nothing particularly special about them. Nothing that makes them stand out, so I'm afraid the item of clothing could well be produced and sold anywhere. We found no skin cells or blood along with them, so I suspect they ended up there as a result of a fleeting grasp. Perhaps he was holding on or trying to force someone away."

"As a result of an attack?"

"Hmm... that's hard to say. I wouldn't like to speculate," he said. "But, needless to say, should you find a similar item of clothing I'm sure we'll be able to match it."

"Great, we'll try to do that. Thank you—"

"One more thing before you go."

Tamara stopped, brushing the hair away from her eyes and listening intently.

"The victim's blood alcohol level was point zero nine."

"That's quite high for daytime," she said, picturing the empty bottle on the worktop.

"Champagne too. Perhaps he had something to celebrate?"

Tamara thought about it. She saw the bottle but missed the fact that it was champagne. What could he have been celebrating? That level of blood alcohol would put him above the legal driving limit. If he was celebrating with someone, did he or she drink as much as him? The chances of a domestic flare-up are greatly increased by alcohol consumption.

Particularly if that person has a chequered emotional history with you. That thought wasn't warming her.

"Thank you, Dr Paxton."

"I'll email the full report to you now."

She hung up and opened the car door to hear Cassie thanking someone and got in as she also hung up.

"That was the pathologist," Tamara said. "Pretty much confirming what we'd already assumed. Time of death is around half past five. Some decent trace evidence under the fingernails too. If we can find a suspect, then we can match it. It would appear Gage was pretty hammered too."

Cassie hadn't spoken. She was looking at her lap, nursing her mobile in her hands.

"What is it?"

Cassie looked up, taking a deep breath. "I just got off the phone with the manager of the holiday-let complex. You remember, he was—"

"Away for a couple of days, yes," Tamara nodded. "What about it?"

"That was him getting back to me. Left me a voicemail earlier, so I just called him."

"And?"

"He saw the woman coming out of Gage's place, the evening before last," Cassie said, biting her lower lip.

"He got a good look at her?"

She nodded. "He knows her well. They're on speaking terms. He said she looked like... like she'd been crying, didn't speak to him at the time and he didn't try to engage."

"What time was this?"

"Five to five-thirty. But, oddly, he says her car was still parked there later that night when he took his dog out for a pre-bedtime pee. That was around ten to ten-thirty."

"Could he be wrong about that?"

Cassie shrugged. "Maybe."

"And? What else?"

"You're not going to like it."

Tamara's sixth sense tingled as Cassie averted her eyes from her gaze.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

---

TOM JANSSEN SLID his key into the lock, wondering what he was about to walk in to. He'd stayed later in the office than planned, waiting on a call from the pathologist that never came. Eric did a sterling job of unearthing as much information about Daniel Crowe as he could find. For once, this was a local who Eric didn't know much about. A point Tom teased the young detective constable about until realising Eric was genuinely disappointed about his lack of knowledge.

However, a few calls from Eric to friends and acquaintances soon bridged the gap. Crowe was a local landowner and an amateur property developer. If there was any land coming onto the market locally, he was often the first to make an offer to the extent that the parcels of land, more often than not, failed to reach the open market. There were even occasions where people flatly refused to sell to him, such was his reputation for being pushy and arrogant. The word locally was that he was willing to utilise third parties in order to get around such obstacles, much to the vendors' chagrin. Crowe was their first port of call for the following day. Right now, Tom felt dead on his feet. Sleep deprivation was catching up on him.

Closing the front door, he stood in the hallway listening. A gentle thud sounded, coming from upstairs, and a little face appeared at the top of the stairs. It was Russell. He stood on the landing, peering down at Tom, cocking his head.

"Hello boy," he said.

The dog sneezed, shaking his head as he did so. Then he turned and disappeared from sight. Glancing at his watch, it was possible Saffy was asleep already. The emotional upheaval of the previous twenty-four hours



must have thrown her entirely. He hung his coat on the nearest hook and went through into the kitchen. Alice was sitting at the dining table, holding a cup of tea with both hands. She looked across at him and smiled as he approached, leaning down to kiss her on the forehead.

"Hey you," he said.

"Hey."

"How are you doing?"

She screwed up her face in mock anguish. "I've had better days, but I'm all right."

"I'm sure," he said, placing a supportive hand on her shoulder and pulling out a chair so that he could sit down beside her. "And Saffy?"

Alice exhaled heavily, looking down at the table and running a hand through her hair. She looked exhausted, as if she was carrying a vast amount of mental weight. Unsurprising because she was, her own shock as well as that of her daughter's.

"At points today I thought she was doing okay, you know," she said, turning to face him, "and then she'd just... collapse in on herself emotionally."

"It will be hard to process it, for sure."

"Not only for her," Alice whispered, taking a mouthful of tea.

She put the cup down on the table and Tom saw it was one of her herbal teas. By the smell and colour, he guessed it was turmeric and something.

"The poor thing can't stop crying," she said. "Who can blame her. She knows what it's like to lose someone, her grandfather dying the year before last was her first, but..."

"But this is different," Tom said. Alice nodded solemnly.

"She was still too young really to understand when my dad died. Now, she knows what death is, but she's only seen it with her hamster and guinea pigs." Alice drew breath, sitting upright and closing her eyes, assembling her thoughts. "I wish I could shield her from all of this."

Tom had forgotten about the guinea pigs. It's a good job they weren't here because in all likelihood Russell would have paid the creatures a great deal of attention and he couldn't guarantee their safety. Terriers, after all, were naturally tremendously skilled ratters.

"It's good that she's crying, though." Alice looked at him, her eyes narrowing. "She can express herself, let out her emotions. That's much

better than bottling it all up for a later date. The fall out would be much worse."

"Ah... you're probably right. She's just so young."

"But she is resilient," Tom said, taking Alice's right hand in his own. "And she has a great mum to look out for her."

Alice smiled. Her eyes teared and she squeezed Tom's hand affectionately.

"Have you contacted Rosie, was she okay?"

The name didn't ring a bell, and his expression must have shown that.

"Ade's sister," she said. "It's only the two of them now. Their mother died a few years back."

Tom shook his head. "I don't know. I've been out of the office most of the day. I would have thought so. Someone will have had to... well, you know."

Alice didn't reply, instead gazed into the liquid of her cup.

"Did Adrian ever talk to you about his work?"

Alice raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips. "When we were married, he used to talk about nothing else," she said, shaking her head. "At first I found his passion absolutely wonderful, but then, after a few years of it, it seemed to be all-encompassing. And that was when it caused problems."

"Problems?"

"There were three in our marriage, Tom." He glanced up at the ceiling as if he could see into the bedroom beyond and the sleeping little girl, but somehow he knew that she wasn't referring to their daughter. "Ade was wedded just as much to his work as he was to me. And it wasn't like he was out nine to five, or even nine till nine for that matter. The way he did things, the way he'd drop everything and everyone if he needed to, made him an incredibly frustrating man to be around. If you've ever lived with a workaholic, then you'd understand. Even when he was at home, Ade was never really here with us. Always distracted. Always looking for the angle."

"I'll bet," Tom said, suddenly feeling quite self-conscious and vulnerable. He caught her looking at him. She was thinking the same thing, he could tell.

"At least I know what you are up to, Tom Janssen." She cocked her head. "At least for most of the time. Catching the bad guys and keeping people safe. But with Ade it was different. He was chasing down leads, harrying witnesses, and generally trying to put the world to rights."

"Any idea what he was working on more recently?"

Alice fixed her eye on him. "Is that what you think that what happened to him had something to do with his work?"

"I'm not on the case, remember."

"And would you tell me if you were?"

Tom smiled apologetically. "No. Probably not."

"But you still want to know."

He nodded.

"I can't help you though," she said, lifting her cup and sipping. "I wish I did know. I mean, it would be great to make sense of all of this, if only so I could try to explain it to Saffy."

He felt guilty then. Having left so early that morning, he hadn't been around to help either Alice or Saffy cope with the news. He couldn't, he had a job to do, but he also hadn't picked up the phone to call home once during the day. Being wrapped up in himself and the Beckett case had detached him from what was going on in his personal life. His two roles were colliding and he had to find a better way to manage things.

"I'm sorry," he said. She shot him an enquiring look. "I'm sorry I wasn't here for the two of you today."

Alice glanced away from him. For a second, he thought she was angry, but then she shifted in her seat, pushing the chair away from the table to enable her to sit facing him. She put her hands in his and smiled, an expression that belied the pain she was clearly bearing.

"I know you're here for us Tom, I do. And what you do is important. Please don't ever feel you have to choose between us."

The doorbell sounded. Tom glanced at the clock. It was late for a house call. The familiar thud came from upstairs as Russell hopped from Alice's bed to come and investigate. Alice glanced in the direction of the hall and made to stand, but he tapped the back of her hand.

"Stay here. I'll get it."

Taking a deep breath, he wondered if the local press had got wind of Alice's connection to the murdered man in Cley. It was only a matter of time until they did so and then came hunting for a story or two. Preparing to bat away the questions, he saw several figures through the obscured glass set within the front door. Probably a cameraman as well.

He unlocked the door and pulled it open. He was surprised.

"Hi Tom."

Something in her tone unnerved him. Glancing to Tamara's left, Cassie smiled a greeting, but it was half-hearted at best.

"Hi. What's going on?"

Only now did he see the uniformed patrol car parked outside on the street with two officers sitting inside watching the exchange. Tamara handed him a folded sheet of A4 paper.

"I'm sorry to have to do this, Tom," she said.

He unfolded the paper. It was a search warrant.

"Who is it?" he heard Alice ask from behind. Tom turned side on to the door, allowing her to see past him. Cassie looked down whereas Tamara acknowledged Alice with an embarrassed smile. Behind them, the uniformed officers got out of the car and made their way towards the house.

"We need to speak with Alice," Tamara said.

"Now? Are you kidding?" Tom asked.

Tamara shook her head, frowning. "I'm sorry. It can't wait." She stepped past him and into the hall. Cassie met his eye. An entire verbal exchange passed between them in his reading of her expression.

"What's this about?" Alice asked, fear edging into her tone. She looked to him for an explanation, but he didn't have one.

"We need you to come with us to the station, Alice," Tamara said.

"Why?"

"I think it's for the best if we talk about it at the station."

"Tom?" Alice asked, clearly scared, her face dropping as her eyes jumped from person to person, settling on him. He stood in silence, aware he was open-mouthed. "Am I... am I under arrest?"

"I'd rather not arrest you," Tamara said, glancing between her and Tom. "I'd prefer it if you came with us voluntarily."

"But... Saffy—"

"But I will arrest you if I have to," Tamara said sternly. Alice's eyes shot across to Tom, panic-stricken.

"It'll be okay," he said, holding his hands up to try and reassure her. "I'll be here with Saffy... and I'm sure this has all been a mistake or something. It'll all be ironed out."

Cassie looked at him and he recognised doubt in her expression.

"We'll also need to search the property," Tamara said, returning to her professional persona. Tom sensed this made her feel more comfortable. She met his eye but didn't say anything else as she placed a hand on Alice's

upper arm and encouraged her to leave the house with her. They walked to the door, Tom forcing a reassuring smile.

"Mummy?"

They turned to see Saffy standing at the top of the stairs with her favourite cuddly toy, Mr Polar Bear, dangling by his arm from her left hand, Russell sitting obediently at her feet. Alice looked at Tamara despairingly. Tamara bit the outside of her lower lip and nodded almost imperceptibly. Alice calmly made her way up the stairs. Tom glared at Tamara.

"Don't look at me like that, Tom," she said quietly, so only the two of them could hear.

She made room for the uniformed constables to pass between them as they set about the search routine. Only two of them acknowledged Tom as they came past. All three carried awkward expressions. Cassie came alongside Tom.

"I've spoken with them all," she said. "They'll be thorough but respectful. You'll not know they've been here. I promise."

Tom cast a glance to the top of the stairs where Alice was attempting to calm a tearful eight-year-old, explaining that she wouldn't be long. "You reckon?" he said.

Cassie stepped past him without another word, taking the officers aside to issue instructions. Tom turned back to Tamara.

"We have no choice, Tom."

"Like this?" he hissed, trying hard to check himself as a constable looked over. "Did you have to do it like this?"

Tamara looked away and then back again, lowering her voice to a whisper. "We have two witnesses who put Alice at the scene around the confirmed time of death."

Tom shook his head forcefully. "No. No, I'm not buying that—"

"It's a solid lead, Tom. We have to follow it—"

"Yeah, tell it to someone who's interested!"

He pushed past her, mounting the bottom tread of the stairs as Alice descended. He took her hand, pulling her into him. She placed her head on his shoulder and he buried himself into her hair, whispering into her ear. No one else could see the action, he made sure of that. "This will be over soon. Tell the truth and everything will be fine."

She withdrew from him, wiping tears from her eyes with the back of her hand and keeping her back to Saffy, so that she wouldn't see. "Look after

her," she whispered.

"I will, promise. I love you."

She sniffed hard, passing him and heading to the door where Tamara waited. Tom didn't look back. Instead, he climbed the stairs and scooped Saffy up into his arms, holding her tightly and carrying her back to her bedroom. He was furious, feeling the anger surging through him, but he wouldn't let Saffy see it. He couldn't.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

---

TOM STARED AT THE CLOCK. He'd only checked it ten minutes previously. It felt longer. Much longer. The sky outside was lightening. Alice liked to sleep with the curtains open, something he'd had to get used to since they'd been together. The window into their bedroom faced the rising sun, but today it was grey and overcast. Almost as if the weather was set to match his mood. Throwing off the duvet, he swung his legs out and came to a sitting position on the edge of the bed, looking out of the window to the horizon. The clouds moved at pace.

He was tired. He should be, having barely slept for most of the night. Saffy's dreams had been restless and her sleep fitful. Three times she'd called out for Alice and he'd gone through to comfort her, and each and every time she asked if her mum was home, and then, after he answered, when would she be? He didn't know the answer to her question. It was one of a number that swirled around in his mind all night, causing not only insomnia but a frustrated anger that failed to dissipate. Tamara's decisions bugged him. Mind you, she wasn't likely to have detained Alice without cause, but she was wrong, at best misguided and at worst... He didn't know the answer to that question either.

Why on earth did they think Alice could have had anything to do with Adrian's death? They knew Alice. The notion was preposterous. Perhaps they didn't know her as well as he did, but certainly they'd spent time with her while she was at Tom's side. Granted, that was in a social setting, and fleeting for the most part, but even so, she wasn't the type. That was his rational mind speaking to him. The irrational side whispered negative comments to him and they were more insidious, challenging. Tamara wasn't

one to shoot from the hip. If she did this, then it was for a reason. The familiar churn began again. Was there anything in her behaviour that stood out as abnormal in the last couple of days? Had his emotional connection offset his radar?

Exhaling a deep sigh, he pushed all thoughts aside. All he was doing was succeeding in keeping himself awake and driving himself slightly mad. Rising, he crossed to the window and looked out over the fields. The sky wasn't as cloudy as he first thought, but the morning was certainly grey. Mist clung to the ground, small trees and wild brush poking up from it intermittently, with an orange hue reflecting the morning sun as it crested the horizon. A symbol of hope, perhaps?

Pulling on a pair of joggers and a T-shirt, he went through to Saffy's room. The hinges creaked as he pushed open the door, Russell's head came up from where he lay alongside the sleeping child, staring at Tom expectantly. Saffy's breathing was regular and he hoped she would sleep a little longer. Usually she was up before six, heading downstairs to attack her morning routine of YouTube videos, cereal and early morning children's cartoons. The routine varied from day-to-day but the participants were the same. He backed out of the room, followed by the dog who pushed past his shins to be first down the stairs, moving so quickly he nearly lost his footing. At the bottom, he turned to Tom, ears pricked, waiting to see if Tom was following. As Tom reached the bottom tread, Russell took off towards the kitchen. He needed to go out.

Tom followed, reaching the kitchen as a key turning in the lock made him stop. Alice opened the front door and entered, surprised to see him standing there.

"Hey," he said, forcing a smile. He was desperate to press her for details, to hear why they'd pulled her into the station.

"Hi," she said, returning his smile. Hers was dejected. She looked exhausted, worse than when she pulled a double shift at the hospital. He moved towards her, hesitating when he heard the dog bark. Glancing behind him into the kitchen, he looked back at her.

"The dog," he said sheepishly, indicating with his thumb over his shoulder.

She nodded and smiled, loosening her coat and shrugging it off her shoulder. He hurried into the kitchen and opened the door to the garden. Russell took off through it before the gap was wide enough for him.



"Stupid animal," he muttered. Alice hadn't appeared in the kitchen and he went back into the hall searching for her. She was halfway up the stairs. "Alice?"

His voice stopped her in her tracks. She had one hand on the banister, the other she ran through her hair, shaking it loose from the hair band she'd put in place the previous night. However, she didn't look down at him. He reached the foot of the stairs, mounting them to go to her but her tone stopped him.

"I'm tired, Tom." She half-turned to look at him, weariness visibly descending upon her. "I just want to hug my daughter, have a shower and go to bed."

That was understandable. He kept himself composed, but inside he was shouting.

"I'm sure, but—"

"No, Tom!" she said pointedly, holding one hand up, palm facing him. She must have realised how aggressive she sounded because she bit her lower lip, shrugging off the tightness to her upper body and rolling her head across her shoulders. "I'm sure you have a million questions... so much you want to know, but I just want to see Saffy and get some sleep."

She was right. He wanted to hear everything, but the debrief would probably take almost as long as the interview process she'd just experienced. She was fatigued. He could see that. To press her now wouldn't go well, no matter how much he wanted to. He acknowledged her request with a brief nod and a flick of his eyebrows.

"I'm sorry," she said. He thought she was going to say something else as they locked eyes. He saw something in them beyond the exhaustion and the fear he'd recognised the previous night. Now he saw pain.

"Okay. We'll talk later?"

She smiled weakly, offering a curt nod.

"I spoke with your mum last night," he said. She stopped, turning back to him with an unreadable expression. "I wondered if she might take Saffy today. I'm presuming she's not going back into school today?"

"No. I hadn't planned to send her. Not until she's ready. What did Mum say?"

"That she was free and would gladly help."

"Did you tell her... where I was?"

"No. I figured you'd not want to be asked too many questions." The irony of that statement was not lost on him. "She'll be here for nine."

"Right."

Alice turned and made her way up to the landing without looking back. She pushed open Saffy's door and disappeared from view. Tom braced himself on the banister, blowing out his cheeks. Russell appeared at the threshold to the kitchen, cocking his head. Tom looked in his direction and the dog barked a solitary woof at him, the usual sound he made when expecting to be fed.

"Okay, little man," he said, heading through to the kitchen. Russell went to where his bowl was in the corner of the room and sat down, watching Tom expectantly. By the time he'd filled the water bowl, opened a can of dog food and made his way back upstairs to take a shower, he found Alice snuggled up with Saffy in her bed. Both were sound asleep, Alice with her arm across her daughter and Saffy holding her forearm with her right hand. Whether she'd woken as her mum got into bed, he couldn't say, but she certainly sensed her presence. He could see Alice had been crying. Not since she'd come home, but at some point during the night.

Retreating from the room, he closed the door as quietly as he could, making a mental note to oil the hinges as soon as he could find the time. He showered in the ensuite bathroom and got himself dressed, leaving the house before either of them woke up. Stopping off at his usual haunt to pick up coffee, he brought several cups to take away, barely passing the time of day with his friend unlike usual.

The short journey to the station was unsettling. He could feel the anxiety mounting as he drove the last few miles. Tamara would be waiting for him. She would know he'd have questions, demands even, and she wouldn't avoid his scrutiny by slipping away. She'd allow him to have his say. And he intended to once he knew what was going on. Entering the ops room, he found Eric at his desk stifling a yawn. Was he here all night too? Eric looked up, the surprise on his face switching swiftly to anticipation, but anticipation of what Tom couldn't tell. They were all on unfamiliar ground this morning.

"Morning, Tom," Eric said, very formally, as if that was the best thing to do. Tom knew he'd have been worrying about how to greet him from the moment he came into work. It was written all over his face. A face that was

way too fresh to have been up all night. But he knew what had played out. It was clear in his tone.

"Morning, Eric," Tom said, handing him a coffee and then looking around the office. "Just you?"

"Yes. Well, no..."

Tom raised an eyebrow as Eric went to sip at his coffee, instead placing it down on the desk.

"I mean, I saw Cass on her way out as I was coming in. She was going to get some sleep after... well, you know."

"The DCI?"

"In your office."

Tom looked across the room, seeing Tamara sitting at his desk, watching him through the blinds.

"I think she's waiting to speak to you."

He nodded, patting Eric on the shoulder as he headed for his office. Glancing towards the information boards on the wall, he felt his stomach flutter as he saw a picture of Alice stuck to the top right-hand corner of the whiteboard, a red arrow drawn in thick marker pen linking it to the victim. Tamara rose from behind his desk as he entered.

"Morning, Tom. Close the door, would you?"

He did so, and then came over, setting a coffee down in front of her.

"Thanks." She smiled. "Peace offering?"

"Are we at war?"

"I'd be surprised if you weren't angry with me."

"Bloody livid," he said, sipping at his drink.

Tamara inclined her head, exaggerating a grimace. "You do livid... in an understated manner."

The comment thawed the atmosphere. She had her reasons for doing what she did. Now he had to understand them.

"I'll cut to the chase," she said. "We have two witnesses who can place Alice at the scene."

"Yes, you said as much last night," Tom said, pulling a chair from the side of the room and sitting down, leaving his own for her. "Are they credible?"

"I shouldn't be sharing any of this with you, Tom. You understand that, right?"

"I'll be discrete."

Tamara accepted his word, sitting down across from him. "They are credible. As far as we know they have no connection with the deceased aside from living and working nearby. Both of them know Alice, recognising both her and Saffy. A car matching hers was also there for much of the afternoon on the day he was killed. I held off until I had no choice but to bring her in. Did you know she was there?"

"No, of course I didn't."

"Okay. What was she doing there?"

Tom shrugged, trying to think through the possibilities. "They have a shared history, a child. They're going to spend time together."

"All afternoon?"

He was rocked by the revelation, although he tried hard not to show it. Tamara was attentive. Did she see how thrown he was. Casting his mind back to when he got home from work that night, the night before Gage was found dead, Alice had just come out of the shower. He thought she was washing off the dirt of her working day. He was surprised to find Saffy was at her grandmother's. Their exchange felt odd at the time but he couldn't understand why.

"Tom?"

He looked up. "Sorry. What did you say?"

"Apparently she'd been crying. Any idea why that might be?"

"You should probably be asking Alice rather than me, don't you think?"

"I did," she said, glancing away and out of the window. "I'm not going to sugar coat this for you, Tom. Alice isn't helping herself."

He chose not to comment. Besides, what could he say? It was news to him that Alice had seen her ex-husband that day. He was angry at her now. He still couldn't entertain the idea she had anything to do with his death but, evidently, she chose not to mention the visit. Why would she do that? Was she afraid of how he might react?

"The second witness, the one who saw her leaving the house," Tamara said. Tom looked up. "He... says he's seen Alice there a number of times recently—"

"To pick up and drop off Saf—"

"On several occasions without her daughter."

A wave of emotion passed over him. It was the strangest sensation; one he wouldn't be able to describe.

"What are you saying?"

"I'm not saying anything, Tom. We have a warrant to sequester Alice's telephone records and will also be contacting her employer to ascertain her work schedule. She lied to me about where she was when Adrian Gage was murdered, Tom." He met her eye. "The thing is, if she didn't kill him, why the lie?"

"You have more, don't you?"

Tamara sat forward, placing her elbows on the table and forming a tent with her fingers before her mouth. "Trace evidence was present under the victim's fingernails."

Tom felt a pang in his chest.

"Fibres, not skin cells. We took a number of items from Alice's... from your home," she said steadily. "You know how this works. The lab will try to match those fibres to clothing owned and worn by the suspect. Did Alice happen to be wearing a blue jumper—"

"On the day Gage was stabbed?" he asked. Tamara nodded. He could answer that question. "I don't know what she was wearing." Tamara's eyes narrowed. "Honestly. She was getting out of the shower when I got home."

Tamara made a note. "And what time was that?" She looked up, sensing his reticence. "Tom? What time was that?"

"Six-thirty, seven... something like that. I didn't realise I'd be needing to give a statement."

Tamara put her pen down. "I'm sorry, Tom. Off the record... maybe you should take a moment to consider what you should do next."

"How do you mean?"

"Maybe consider whether now is a good time to put a bit of space between yourself and Alice."

"Are you serious?"

"I'm speaking as a friend, not as your boss. It might be better for her as well."

"How do you figure that?"

"The evidence is leading to her door, and if she's going to be cleared of any involvement, then the perception has to be right."

"I would never risk prejudicing the investigation—"

Tamara shook her head, holding up both hands to ask him to slow down. "And I'm not saying you would, but it's perception. If Alice has done nothing wrong, and there may well be a simple explanation to cover all of this, then she'll be cleared. It just wouldn't look good for our chief sus—"

She stopped herself from finishing the comment, instead placing her palms flat on the desk. "It won't look good, her living with a senior detective working out of this station—"

"When she's cleared," Tom said. "True."

He stood up, making a beeline for the door.

"Tom. You know I have no choice but to play it this way." He stopped with one hand on the door, turning back to face her. "You would have played it exactly the same way and deep down you know it."

"DID you find the murder weapon, either in the house or nearby?"

Tamara picked up her coffee and sipped at it. "No. We think it might have been a knife from the kitchen. Suggestive of an impulsive action rather than a premeditated act."

He nodded, drumming his fingers on the door jamb, and left without another word. He caught her watching him as he crossed the ops room.

"Eric. Come on," he said, striding towards the door. The detective constable jumped out of his seat. "We have to swing by the pathologist's office and then go to see a man about a planning application."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

---

THE SKIES WERE CLEARING NOW which was often the way on the north Norfolk coast. The day starts off with a hint of promise but one that can swiftly be forgotten depending on the prevailing winds. When they reached the pathologist's office, the mist was burning off and retreating from the coastline. Now, nearing the middle of the day, heading for the registered address of Daniel Crowe, the sun was sitting high and the warmth of early summer made its presence known.

The same could not be said for the pathologist's laboratory. Dr Tim Paxton was busy, summoning them to the morgue rather than his office. For obvious reasons the rooms were kept at a cool temperature, despite the cadavers being stored in refrigeration chambers. The more he thought about Dr Paxton's analysis of Mary Beckett, he couldn't help but think the information given was more pertinent than he currently realised. But not because of the cause of death.

"The victim suffered a brain haemorrhage, undoubtedly resulting from the rather obvious blow to the head," Dr Paxton said, reading from his notes and peering over the rim of his glasses at Tom. "My x-rays show evidence of only a single blow to the left temporal bone, located to the side of the head which caused the depressed fracture."

He passed a clipboard to Tom, folding over the sheet at the top so he could see a photocopy of a generic human skull. The doctor had marked where the wound could be found. The impact point was almost directly vertical from the end of the jawbone.

"Any idea of the weapon used?"

Paxton's brow furrowed. "Hard to say. Blunt object, smooth. Weighty I should imagine."

"But she was definitely attacked?" Tom asked. "Or could this have been an injury caused by a fall. I know her age but I'm unsure whether she was frail."

"I wouldn't think so, no. The impact point, had she fallen, would be less specific. The injury would also be more spread out, unless of course she fell against the edge of a table or wash basin perhaps. I think someone killed her. Death might not have been instantaneous. There's a good chance the internal bleeding took a while to see her off but she certainly would have lost consciousness almost immediately from the blow. And she saw it coming."

"What makes you say that?"

"Where she was struck, the angle of the blow." Dr Paxton reached over and pulled Eric in front of him, using him as a prop in his demonstration. Eric didn't seem pleased but didn't resist. Paxton then stood in front of him. "I think the attacker was right-handed. You can see that if I reach out for something and swing it forward." He picked up an empty coffee mug from the table and swung it as if he was aiming a blow at Eric's head. Eric flinched but Paxton withdrew the motion before he connected. "You'll see the hairline fractures that emanate from the impact point," he said, pointing to an x-ray in the file. Tom looked closer. "The way they radiate out is indicative of such a strike. I think the attacker was a similar height to the victim, perhaps shorter, or raised their arm from a lower position, hence why I think it may have been an odd choice of weapon."

"Odd choice?"

"Whatever was at hand. If it was picked up off the table or the floor, it might explain the angle of the impact. In my experience, if someone plans an attack they are usually prepared with a weapon, a bat, or a cosh, and they will strike down from above ensuring a proper swing with their weight behind it. In this case, I think the blow came up and across."

"Instinctive perhaps," Tom said. Dr Paxton agreed. Eric was excused and stepped away, dusting himself off, an action signifying his discomfort at playing a role rather than to clean anything away.

"You said you were waiting on something?" Tom asked.

"Yes, her medical records," Paxton said, taking the clipboard back. He skipped several pages until reaching what he was looking for. "I noted



during the autopsy a number of swollen areas in the victim's body. Initially I located areas on the joints of both knees and in the elbows, a cluster on her right wrist. She was a slight lady and they stood out. At first, I figured that with her age she was suffering from arthritis but as soon as I carried out a full body scan it was clearly more serious than that. I needed the medical records in order to determine how advanced and, therefore, how much impact the condition would have had on her in day-to-day life."

"What was it?"

"Bone cancer. The full body scan showed up more than I found with a visual inspection. She had tumours in her spine, arms, legs and pelvis," Dr Paxton said, frowning. "She'd clearly been suffering for quite some time."

"Terminal?"

"All life ends, Inspector. There are only so many beats in a heart and when they're used up things reach a natural conclusion. By all measures I could see, she did very well. I chatted with an oncologist friend of mine, more of a general discussion than the specifics of Mrs Beckett's case. The five-year survival rate for both adults and children is roughly seventy percent. Mary Beckett was diagnosed thirteen years ago. As I said, particularly in light of her age she was doing remarkably well. She must have been suffering."

Tom didn't recall the family mentioning a battle with cancer. "Forgive me, but I'm not knowledgeable about bone cancer. How does it manifest?"

"Like most other cancers, in any number of ways depending on how aggressive it is and whether it's spread. Tumours can form anywhere in the body, most notably in the joints. Tumours will form and release too much calcium into the bloodstream, worst case scenario causing unconsciousness and perhaps death, or the bones themselves could become fragile and break, never to heal. That's not to dismiss the everyday aches and pains cancer in this form brings. This could be mild in the form of sharp or dull aches in the arms, legs or pelvis, through to excruciating pain which would be incredibly debilitating."

Tom had a thought, remembering his conversation with her family. "Did you find any sign of dementia?"

Dr Paxton's brow furrowed. "No, I didn't. Why do you ask?"

"It ran in the family, apparently. There was a suggestion of schizophrenia on one side of the family as well."

"Curious. I suppose it can be genetic. One could build a case for it." Dr Paxton crossed to a side table and opened a folder, flicking through some papers. He lifted a sheet out and tapped at it with his forefinger, returning and handing it to Tom. "There are several notes here from her GP where she visited the practice seeking information and advice relating to dementia. But nothing more. On the second appointment she took a cognitive test, pretty standard in such cases, followed up with a blood test to see if there were any other conditions that might cause the symptoms." He scanned down through the file, locating the results. "Yes. Here it is. Blood tests returned normal for liver, kidney, thyroid... yes, all good. And she passed the cognitive test as well."

"When was that?"

Dr Paxton checked. "Two years ago."

The passing landscape fizzed by and he pushed the conversation with the pathologist aside. Something was piquing his curiosity but he couldn't quite pinpoint what or why. He glanced across at Eric, two hands on the steering wheel and maintaining eye contact on the road in front at all times, keeping to a steady fifty-five miles per hour. Eric wasn't his usual chatty self and Tom knew why.

"I know what's on your mind, Eric, but please don't fret about it."

Eric glanced his way and then back to the road. The comment broke the ice on the subject but the young DC looked more uncomfortable as a result.

"I'm sorry about... you know, Alice and—"

"Thanks, Eric. It's nice of you to say so."

Eric smiled awkwardly, tilting his head as he made to speak but seemed to think better of it and ended up stumbling his response. "Just so you know, I don't believe she did it. Alice. She's not the type in my mind."

"In your mind?" Tom asked, reading the unsaid in between the lines. Perhaps she was in someone else's?

"Oh... yes... well, I mean that I know her. And she's not capable of it."

"It's okay, Eric. Things just have to run their course. It's the way it is." He was keen to put him out of his misery, as well as to shelve the conversation. He agreed with Eric, although Alice's attitude about the whole situation bothered him but as yet he didn't know why.

"Talk to me about the harassment Mary Beckett reported," Tom said.

Eric spoke without losing focus, his tone lightening with the subject change. "The calls made to her from the burner phone were logged but the

service provider told us it hasn't been active in the last three years. The number hasn't been reassigned though."

"Do they do that?"

"Oh yes. Most notably when contract plans are cancelled and the number isn't transferred it will be reassigned. Network providers can recycle prepaid mobile numbers if they believe the phone is no longer active. It's how they make the most efficient use of the numbers they have. It can be done within thirty days of the number being made dormant."

"And they don't have to tell the owner?"

Eric shook his head. "No. This particular number has shown up on the networks since Mary Beckett made a complaint but, aside from confirming the phone is still in our area, the data isn't particularly valuable to us."

"Why not?"

"It wasn't used to make calls or send texts. The SIM went active and traded data across the web, but communications were encrypted."

"And what does that mean in English, Eric?" Tom asked, smiling. "I doubt we're dealing with MI5 here."

Eric laughed. "No, of course not. Probably means the user swapped messages within an app of some kind. These can be encrypted for privacy at both ends, so all you see is data passing to and from the handset. Not even the app producer could tell you what was in it."

"Right, but it's still active?"

"As far as we know, yes. The usage has been sporadic but it would indicate the owner is local to our area, resident as well I suspect. The phone seems to come active in short bursts every few months then goes quiet again. Strange. More recently it has been used to call another mobile number, though."

"Another burner?"

Eric nodded. Tom wondered why the mobile might be used in this way. A prepaid mobile was popular with those who wanted the benefit of a phone but weren't high consumers of either minutes or data. Other users might be young children, parents trying to rein in their spend and keep the costs down. Neither seemed to fit into this scenario. The notion of a child carrying out a campaign of harassment of this nature was fanciful. But why would an adult use a mobile so sparingly? Even people who had limited interaction over the phone would show a consistent pattern, not leaving

long periods between use. Eric was right, it was strange. Why it was suddenly actively calling another number was intriguing.

"Has the other number been flagged as well?"

"Yes," Eric said. "The network will contact us if and when there is activity. Obtaining the transcripts of previous or future calls will need an extension to the warrant."

Tom rolled his tongue across the inside of his cheek. Although this was a murder inquiry, they would need more justifiable cause in order to see the details contained within those transcripts. If Beckett's harassment was more recent he was certain they'd get it, but not as things currently stood.

"What about Mary Beckett's accusations regarding her being stalked?"

"That is interesting," Eric said, taking a left turn and feeding the steering wheel through his hands. "She came to us several times to report someone following her, much as her sister described to us. The first note on file I could dig up was from six years ago. At first, she was given fairly generic advice – keep a record of events, number plates of suspicious vehicles, try to avoid being alone in vulnerable locations. Stuff like that. It doesn't seem very adequate."

Eric had a point. The criminal justice system had been slow to recognise stalking as a crime and the subsequent legislation even longer to get through the system. Police forces around the country were adapting to the realisation of the different forms harassment could take as well as how serious it could become.

"Yeah, we've come a long way even in the last six years. Unless someone was actually assaulted, there never used to be much we could do. Did she keep reporting incidents?"

"Yes, repeatedly. Eventually her file was passed up to CID to investigate. I imagine her as being quite a formidable woman." Tom agreed. Formidable was certainly an apt description but he could imagine some more colourful words also being used.

"And the outcome?"

"No case to answer. In the investigator's opinion," Eric said. "I'd have to check whose case it was. I can't remember off the top of my head. It didn't go down well with Mary Beckett, though. And it didn't stop her filing reports. In the end she was advised to stop wasting police time. She even lodged a complaint against the station."

"Formidable," Tom said.

"Yes, very. But, in the end, she stopped calling us."

Tom considered that. Did she do so because she was a fantasist or did she lose faith in the police to protect her? The fact she'd been murdered certainly put her allegations, and the police, in a new light.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

---

"MR CROWE?" Tom asked. The man standing in the doorway was in his late fifties, red-faced with contrasting white hair. He was heavy set, perhaps formerly a working man who tilled his land, but his frame was now reminiscent of a less active life. He looked Tom up and down, his eyes flitting to Eric. Tom brandished his warrant card. "Detective Inspector Tom Janssen. Could we have a word?"

"You'd better come in," Crowe said, opening the door wider and stepping aside to let them through. Tom entered first and Eric followed. Daniel Crowe closed the door. They were standing in a vast entrance hall, a double height space lit by huge panes of glass set above the entrance door. Massive beams bridged the gap between walls, age-old timbers gnarled and pitted with what looked like man-made cuts in them. He wondered what they were for. Crowe came alongside him, noting Tom's interest.

"This used to be one of the old barns we used when the farm was much larger than it is now. Those beams came from the tall ships when they were refitted. That's why they have those cuts in them."

Tom followed the line of the beams, seeing the cuts were uniform and evenly spaced. Imagining them vertically rather than horizontally, as they were now, he could see where they made up the floor joists. He'd seen such holes in other old properties over the years but never realised this was the reason.

"There's a lot of history on show."

Crowe smiled. "The character is built right into the fabric of the building. It was the best decision we ever made, selling the old place and converting this. Now, what can I do for you Inspector?"

"We're investigating the murder of a local woman, Mary Beckett. I believe you know her."

Crowe's mouth fell open at the mention of Beckett's murder. Whether that was a result of hearing about her death or his link to her, Tom couldn't tell. His lips moved as he tried to form words, but he was clearly thrown. It didn't seem like he was a man easily thrown. It unsettled him.

"She's been murdered? I hadn't heard."

"I'm afraid so."

Crowe gathered himself and gestured for them to accompany him. "Please, do come through." He set off across the hall, showing them through to an adjoining room. Whereas the entrance hall was dominated by wood, this room was much softer in tone. Three large four-person sofas were arranged in a U shape around a large wood burner set into the far wall. The carpets were deep pile and a large sheepskin rug was laid out before the fireplace. They took a seat, Crowe appearing awkward. He must be concerned about why they were there to see him.

"Murdered, you say?" Crowe sat forward, elbows on his knees, slowly rubbing his palms together. "And why do you need to speak to me?"

"A witness saw you arguing with Mary recently."

"Really?"

"Outside the Blakeney Village Hall."

Crowe drew a deep breath, raising himself upright and slowly nodding as he recalled the event. "Ah... yes. That would be correct. Words... were exchanged and it did get a little heated between the two of us."

"Can you elaborate for us?" Tom asked. Eric was poised with a pen hovering over his notebook. "What was the argument relating to?"

"Oh, well, yes, that's easy enough. Mary and I don't... didn't," he corrected himself, "see eye to eye on a number of issues. Predominantly progress."

"Progress?"

He nodded emphatically. "It's been a long-held battle between two sides, Inspector. Between those who want things to be preserved pretty much as they are and those of us who see the future in a very different way. You can't stand in the way of progress, otherwise society will collapse around you."

"Right. I see," Tom said. Crowe was being far too vague. "You are one of the major landholders in the area, isn't that correct?" Crowe agreed with a

satisfied smile crossing his face momentarily. "But as I understand it," Tom glanced at Eric, "you have diversified your agricultural business, leaning more towards property development. Is that right?"

"Fair description, yes. My family have worked these parts for generations, but personal circumstances enforced a change." Tom raised an eyebrow, encouraging him to continue. "My wife and I... well, I have no sons to continue the farm, and we're not getting any younger."

"You have no children?"

Crowe shook his head. "No, I'm afraid not. And that is how it's always worked within the family. Unfortunately, I will be the last Crowe to work the land around these parts." His face took on a faraway look, then he sighed and returned his attention to Tom. "So, we made a decision a few years ago to lease out much of the agricultural land to tenant farmers, sold other parts for development and have kept an open mind regarding the future. It's all been quite an adjustment for us but, despite the land being in my blood, a worthwhile one, I fancy."

The door to the room opened and a woman entered. She started when she caught sight of Tom and Eric, placing one hand on her chest in surprise.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realise we had company."

"They're from the police, love," Crowe said. "This is my wife, Elizabeth."

Both Tom and Eric smiled as she came to sit alongside her husband. As she sat down, Daniel Crowe reached across to adjust the hem of her flowing summer dress, ensuring that it adequately covered her legs. Tom found the action curious because her dress was in no way revealing.

"Whatever are the police doing here?" she asked. She appeared nervous about their presence, sitting down and putting her hands together in her lap.

"They're investigating Mary Beckett's death," Crowe told her. "Apparently she was murdered."

Elizabeth Crowe audibly gasped, looking between her husband and Tom. "Why ever would they think you could help?"

"It's that little spat we had after the planning consultation. You remember?"

She nodded, pursing her lips. "Strange woman, Mary." She turned to Tom immediately, shock in her expression. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be rude... but she was a little odd."



"Mad old bat!" Crowe said, drawing a stern glance from his wife. His expression softened as he immediately backtracked. "Sorry, Inspector. But, as my wife says, Mary was an odd one. We certainly clashed on what innovations were justifiable for the area but, aside from that, she was weird. But that's what you get for spending your entire life focussed on birds, talking to no one but the trees and that halfwit of a sister of hers."

"Daniel!" Elizabeth said, averting her eyes from both detectives in embarrassment.

"Sorry, love," he said, patting her thigh softly.

Tom sat forward, glancing to his left to see if Eric was picking up the body language as well as the nuances in the conversation. He was making copious notes, so he was confident. "Can we go back a bit? You said you fell out that night over... progress?"

Daniel Crowe nodded. "Yes. It was a planning consultation meeting set up for local residents to listen to what the developers had in mind."

"Houses?"

"No, no. Not on this occasion. This was a consultation on the proposed Norfolk Wash Wind Farm." Tom hadn't heard much about this particular project. He knew the Crown Estate had released parcels of offshore land for development of renewable technologies, but beyond that, which was what Eric had told him earlier, he was in the dark. "The firm which obtained the licence was looking for locations to bring the cabling ashore."

"Cabling?" Eric asked.

"Yes. It's all very well having these offshore wind farms, but the power needs to make landfall somewhere. It requires a switching station to connect the energy to the national grid."

Tom cupped his chin between thumb and forefinger, noticing the anniversary cards on the mantelpiece above the wood burner. Seemingly the couple had recently celebrated being married for thirty-five years. "Presumably, if Mary Beckett was opposed to this, it was the potential siting of the switching station she objected to."

"Location, size... having one at all," Crowe said with a dismissive laugh. "I mean, I know the station would be large but it has to be in order to cope with the wind farm for heaven's sake. But she was so against the development." He was becoming quite animated, wagging a finger as he spoke. "There were three proposed sites for the switching station. Not one of them was acceptable for the woman."

"She felt the construction would have damaged the environment?"

"So she said. But it's a balancing act, Inspector. If you saw the statistics for how the Sheringham Shoal project revitalised the local area, you'd see it was all worth it. The new harbour built at Wells to cope with the project rejuvenated the commercial shipping sector in the port. Not only that, but the firm ploughed money into the community, not just in jobs but in community projects. We're talking children's play areas, grants to local enterprise. Believe me, the list goes on and on."

Tom inclined his head. Crowe was making a decent argument.

"A couple of hundred years ago, Inspector," Crowe continued, "this region, after London, was the second richest in England. Agriculture and the textile industry brought people and trade from around the world to Norfolk. Then industrialisation came about, and the Mary Becketts of this world waved it away. It didn't affect us, we didn't need it. And what happened?"

It was Elizabeth who answered.

"The textile industry collapsed and Norfolk was left behind. That's what my husband thinks."

Daniel enthusiastically agreed. "And we've been paying for it ever since. Have you ever wondered why there are no motorways in Norfolk? Left behind, Inspector Janssen."

"A lot of people quite like it this way," Tom said, playing devil's advocate. For a moment he thought he saw Elizabeth nod as he spoke, but she remained impassive.

"Each to his own," Crowe said. "But now, right now, we have the opportunity to be at the centre of the next wave of industrialisation by embracing green energy. It's the future and people like Mary, bless her, need to get on board for the greater good."

"And the argument?" Tom asked, pulling the conversation back to their falling out.

"Something and nothing really. Like I said, the woman was bonkers! She got more than enough time to make her points in the meeting. I disagreed."

Elizabeth glanced sideways at her husband. Catching Tom's eye, she averted hers from his gaze, absently fiddling with her hands.

"Okay, I think that will do for now," Tom said, standing up and indicating for Eric to do the same. "One last question." Daniel nodded.

"Besides your interest in regenerating the area for the twenty-first century, what do you stand to gain from the wind farm's construction?"

Crowe smiled. His wife looked at the floor.

"It's no secret, Inspector. Two of the three proposed sites under consideration are on land that I..." he looked at his wife, "that we own. There will always be those who benefit from progress. There's a two in three chance that it will be us on this occasion."

"Thank you, Mr Crowe. I appreciate your candour," Tom said. "Oh, and just for our records, could you tell us your movements for the night before last?"

"Yes, of course," Crowe said without hesitation. "I played a round of golf with a couple of the chaps, had a drink at the nineteenth hole as usual and..." His brow furrowed as he thought hard. "Yes, then I came home and Elizabeth and I had rather a nice meal. I was home by seven, as I recall."

"I see," Tom said, smiling his thanks. "And you didn't go out again that night?"

"No, not at all. Did I dear?" He looked at his wife and she shook her head.

"Great. Thanks for that," Tom said, looking at Eric who was making a note.

"I'll see you out, Inspector," Elizabeth said, standing up and encouraging Tom to take the lead with an open hand.

Daniel sat down as they left the room, crossing one leg over the other and drumming his fingers on his thigh. They reached the front door, Eric opening it and stepping out before Elizabeth placed a restraining hand on Tom's forearm. She glanced back the way they'd come, presumably to check her husband wouldn't overhear. She seemed nervous, agitated.

"Is there something else, Mrs Crowe?" he asked.

"My husband... is an opinionated man, Inspector."

He smiled politely. He agreed but didn't say so. She looked behind them once more.

"Mary and I... we were friends, Inspector. Good friends."

Tom was intrigued. He never would have got that impression if she hadn't said so. She hadn't shown much of a reaction when discussing her up until now.

"I shared her views on the switching station. Neither of us had an objection to the wind farm proposal itself. We both thought that was a step

in the right direction." He got the impression this would come as unwelcome news to her husband. "There really is no need for Daniel to be so upset should the station go ahead somewhere else. Daniel did get a little worked up at the weekend after a meeting with the renewables company. They were fearing they might not get the go ahead this week from the planning inspectorate. But, as I said to Daniel, it's not like we need the money. Look around you. It's not as if we are wanting for anything. We have enough."

Tom nodded, waiting to see if there was anything else forthcoming. It didn't appear so.

"Okay, Mrs Crowe. Thank you. I'll bear it in mind."

"Is my husband a suspect?" she asked.

He thought he heard an edge of fear in her tone.

"Why do you ask?"

She shook her head. By the look on her face, she immediately regretted asking the question.

"Because you're here, I suppose."

The answer was unconvincing.

"Just doing some background work, Mrs Crowe. Purely routine."

She smiled weakly, nodded and allowed him to leave. The front door was closed before they reached the car.

"What do you make of that?" Eric asked.

Tom cast a glance around them, admiring the grounds. He could see a pool to the rear. The patio alongside had a wonderful view out to sea.

"I don't know," he said. "There's one thing Elizabeth Crowe hasn't learnt in the course of her thirty-five-year marriage."

"What's that?" Eric asked, opening the car door and glancing across the roof at him.

"Men like Daniel Crowe," Tom said, inclining his head back towards the house, "they never have *enough*."

## CHAPTER TWENTY

---

SAFFY APPEARED at the window as Tom pulled into the drive. It was a welcome familiarity. One he'd missed in recent days. He smiled and waved from behind the steering wheel. She waved back but clearly not quite with the same verve as usual. How he had taken for granted the simple pleasures derived from a little girl's welcoming smile. Once inside the house, both Saffy and her shadow, the dog, ran into the hall to greet him. He dropped to his haunches and she flung her arms around him, holding him as tightly as she could, but her arms couldn't encompass his massive frame. Russell lifted his front paws onto Tom's knee and excitedly attempted to put his nose in between the two of them. Thankfully, he wasn't one to lick.

Tom scratched behind the dog's ear, the terrier angling his head into the movement, his eyes fluttering. Standing up, he kept Saffy in his arms, much to her satisfaction, and headed to the back of the house. Alice was busying herself with tidying up from dinner. The dirty plates were ready to be loaded into the dishwasher and the aromatic smell of spices hung in the air. He felt guilty.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realise it was so late," he said, glancing at the clock. "I should have come home sooner."

Alice glanced over her shoulder at him, rinsing a pan under the tap before strategically placing it in the machine. "No matter. There's a plate in the oven keeping warm."

He smiled his thanks, carrying Saffy towards the space between the dining and living room. He swirled himself from left to right as she withdrew from him a little and he got to see her face. She was smiling. It was the first time he'd seen her do so for days.

"Hey, have you lost another tooth?"

He was almost sure the gap in the top row was wider. She shook her head, still smiling, and reached up to pinch one of her eye teeth between thumb and forefinger, demonstrating the movement with a wobble.

"Not yet!" she grinned.

Her adult teeth were pushing through, forcing out the smaller ones to the side.

"Good. The tooth fairy will be going bankrupt at the rate you're losing them."

"What's bankrupt mean?"

"Bankrupt. It means having no money and not being to pay your debts."

Saffy's eyebrows knitted together and he realised he could be here for quite some time if he wasn't careful.

"Now, where do you want me to put you so that I can eat my dinner?" He swung her to the right, tilting her towards the dining table. She leaned in closer as if fearful of falling but did so with a smile. "You can sit at the table with me." He swung her back the other way, facing the living room. "Or I can deposit you on the sofa!"

"Sofa!"

He obliged, bouncing through into the living room where he flipped her so she was horizontal in his arms, swung her from left to right, and on the count of three dropped her onto the sofa from waist height. She squealed in delight and, just for a moment, the burden of grief seemed to have lifted from her.

"Right, young lady. I'm hungry."

She beckoned him closer in a conspiratorial manner. He leaned over her and she cupped her hands to whisper into his ear.

"Dinner wasn't very nice."

He turned so he could face her, frowning, then glanced back towards the kitchen. "Yours or mine?" he asked, also whispering, knowing Saffy almost always had a different evening meal. She hadn't developed a taste for the same food as them, although she was partial to her mum's Jamaican chicken recipe.

"Yours."

He nodded gravely. "Okay. Thanks for the heads up."

Saffy gave him a knowing look and he winked his thanks as Alice appeared at the edge of the room, a tea towel in her hand, having just taken

his plate from the oven and set it down on the table.

"What are the two of you cooking up?"

Tom and Saffy exchanged smiles, and he ruffled his hand through her hair before leaving. Saffy reached for the television remote and put on her cartoons.

"Ten minutes, little one," Alice said. "Then it's teeth cleaning and up to bed."

Saffy nodded but didn't turn her attention from the screen.

Tom pulled out his chair. Alice folded the towel in half, laying it on the table as she sat down opposite him.

"I swear one day I'll do something about how much screen time she gets every day."

Tom offered her a supportive squeeze of her hand. "We can deal with that later," he said, glancing back to the little girl, mouth open, head propped up by her right hand as she watched. "Right now, it's numbing her."

"Is that a good thing?"

Picking up his fork, he shook his head. "I don't know. She is able to express herself, though, and we see a lot of children who can't. Maybe deflecting some of it isn't such a bad thing."

Alice agreed, rising from the table to continue the clearing up. He was grateful for the waiting meal, but Saffy was correct. It wasn't Alice's best effort.

"How's dinner?" she asked.

He was chewing at the time. Swallowing hard, he forced a smile. "It's lovely, thank you."

Alice placed her hands on her hips, watching him eat and chewing on her lower lip. "It's bloody awful, isn't it?"

He weighed up the correct response, only coming up with two wrong answers. "It's... different."

At first she looked dejected, and then a smile began to creep from the corners of her mouth. "Awful," she repeated.

"Yes, pretty much," he agreed, looking down at his plate with his fork hovering above it. "But all the constituent parts are lovely."

Alice smiled and threw the tea towel at him, which he deftly caught with his left hand before it struck his face.

"I'm taking Saffy up." She walked into the living room. "Come on, monkey. Time for bed."

Unusually, Saffy didn't argue or announce her displeasure at the inequality of the decision. She came back through and gave him a hug goodnight, Tom kissing her forehead. Once he heard the creaking of the stairs as they went up, he was safe to dispose of his dinner. Scraping the contents into the bin, he saw Russell waiting expectantly at the back door. Letting the dog out, he finished the kitchen clear-up before dropping two slices of bread into the toaster. That turned into four rounds of toast before Alice reappeared. All the while, having returned from outdoors, Russell sat at Tom's feet staring up at him, somehow willing him to drop a morsel that he could pounce upon. Much to the dog's disappointment, it failed to materialise. The thought playing over in his mind, however, was how to address the elephant in the room.

"Is she already asleep?" he asked.

"Out like a light. Poor thing's shattered."

He could see she noticed the smell of toast in the air, but she didn't comment. Her easy-going manner when he'd come home had hardened now. Previously, she must have been maintaining the pretence for Saffy's sake. Leaning against the worktop, she ran a hand through her hair and sighed. Suddenly she looked tired, worn out. The dark patches under her eyes showed she'd not slept well, unsurprising seeing as one of the nights had been spent being grilled by Tamara and Cassie.

"I've been putting off calling Carol," she said, folding her arms across her chest and looking at the floor.

"Carol?"

"Ade's sister. I should, I know I should, but..."

"Do you get on with her?"

"Used to," Alice said, looking at him glumly. "The friendship got a little awkward after the breakup. Ade and I kept putting her in the middle... it wasn't fair behaviour from either of us, looking back. In the end Carol had to make a choice and let's face it—"

"Blood is thicker than water."

She agreed with a sad smile.

"Do you know when the funeral will be?" she asked him. Something in her tone struck a chord in him, but he couldn't describe what it was that piqued his curiosity, or his fear. "Carol is the only family Ade had, aside from... me and Saffy."



"No. Not for a while, though," he said. "That's the nature of these things. Until the case is further down the road, Ade won't be released for burial."

"Right. Of course," she said, looking at the floor again.

An awkward silence followed. Neither of them spoke, although he was certain they were both skirting the same subject. In the end, he had to raise it. Initially Alice seemed relieved.

"You were with Adrian the day he died," Tom said, not wanting to look her in the eye as he said so. Usually that was exactly what he would do, analyse the response, assess the truthfulness. This time, he was worried for the answer.

"Yes. I saw him. At his place."

Tom considered the wording of his next comment carefully, avoiding a direct question. "You never said."

Now he looked at her, making eye contact.

"No. I didn't. I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what exactly?"

She shrugged. "I should have said... maybe I would have—"

"You were supposed to be at work. Except you weren't, were you? You were at Adrian's all day."

"I was," Alice said, fear evident in her eyes. "At work, I mean. I was there for the morning shift—"

"And then you went to Adrian's?"

Alice confirmed it with a curt nod, then averted her eyes from his gaze. Tom pursed his lips, contemplating whether he should ask the question on his mind. He did.

"Why were you there?"

He almost whispered the words, dreading the answer but at the same time knowing it couldn't be as bad as the thoughts rattling around in his head.

"You think I might have... that I could—"

"No! No, of course I don't." He shook his head, looking at her unblinkingly. "I don't think you have that in you, even when you're at your darkest."

She stared at him intently, her expression a mixture of frustration and indignation, but it softened, presumably as a result of his sincerity.

"But why were you there?"

She broke away from his gaze then, rubbing her cheeks with her palms.

"You wouldn't tell Tamara," he said, his eyes narrowing.

"I thought you weren't on the case?" she snapped back. Her avoidance of the question hurt him. He shook his head.

"I'm not." He took a deep breath, staring straight ahead. "But I need to know the answer to the question." Alice hardened, scowling at him. "If you won't tell Tamara, you should at least tell me."

Alice pushed off from her resting place, crossing the kitchen and making to leave.

"Don't walk away from me!" he said. She stopped, standing in the middle of the kitchen but refusing to look at him. His anger was rising, borne from frustration. He knew then that she wasn't going to answer the question. He forced his voice into a calm and neutral tone. "I've been advised to... step away for a while."

"Step away?"

"From us," he said, feeling a knot tighten in his chest as he spoke.

Alice gasped. It was almost inaudible, but when he looked at her he saw the hard edge of her demeanour dissipate to be replaced by despair.

"I... I..." she stammered, trying to regain her composure. She turned to face him, fists balled and at her side. The scowl returned. "Just like that, you're going to leave?"

"I didn't say that—"

"But you don't believe I killed him? That's what you said."

"I don't!"

"And what will it look like when you leave me? Have you thought about that?"

He sighed, scratching absently at the side of his head. "It could look just as bad if I stay, too."

He looked up at her, meeting her eye, seeing the emotion threatening to burst out. She made to speak, but the words didn't come. Instead, she folded her arms defensively across her chest and closed her eyes for a moment, gathering her thoughts.

"Work called this morning," she said quietly. "They've suggested I take some annual leave. Seemingly, the relatives of some of the patients are concerned about me caring for them."

Tom took a deep breath, reading the pain in her voice.

"Are you going to?"

"I got the distinct impression it wasn't optional."

He put his head in his hands, feeling the beginnings of a stress headache manifest. He didn't know what to say. There were so many questions in his head. So many fears. While his compassion for her only grew, so did the gnawing realisation that she was keeping something from him. He wouldn't like it, that was evident. Otherwise she would tell him. The internal conflict delayed his response, which was terminal for the conversation.

"Leave your key on the table on your way out," she said, her voice cracking as she turned and strode purposefully from the kitchen.

"Alice!" he said, but it was too late. She was gone.

Placing the flats of his hands across mouth and nose, he closed his eyes, feeling the pressure of the enormity of the conversation. Should he leave? Right now, it felt like he had little choice. Rising slowly, he caught sight of the dog lying on the floor in the corner, head on his paws, watching Tom. He wasn't in his bed. He appeared to be cringing.

Tom made his way upstairs. Alice was nowhere to be seen. He figured she was in with Saffy. Gathering a few items of clothing, he packed them into a gym bag. A lot of his stuff was still on the boat, so he didn't need to take much. It felt wrong, like he was betraying both Alice and Saffy by deserting them when they needed him most. But then there was Alice's intransigence. Was that fair? What was she keeping from him? Until he knew, he couldn't consider staying, even if she wanted him to.

Stepping back out onto the landing, he stopped outside Saffy's bedroom door. It was ajar, the shifting colours of Saffy's fibre optic night-light punctuating the darkness beyond. He reached for the handle, hesitating and then withdrawing from it. Instead, he made his way back downstairs and into the kitchen. Finding Alice's notepad, he tore out a page and scribbled a brief note explaining that he was going to his boat and he would call her tomorrow. Removing the front door key from his ring, he placed it on the table next to the note. Picking up the pen once more, he added, *I love you* at the foot of the paper.

Russell whined and he glanced over at the dog, forcing a smile before picking up his bag and heading for the front door. The terrier followed. At the foot of the stairs, the dog turned from him and placed one paw on the bottom tread. With the front door open, Tom looked back. The dog inclined his head, then looked up the stairs. Tom felt he was being judged.

"You as well, huh?"

The dog looked away and trotted upstairs, disappearing into Saffy's bedroom. Tom stepped out into the darkness and gently closed the door behind him. He walked to his car and just as he was about to unlock it, he heard someone call out.

"Oi, Janssen!"

Tom was startled, looking around for the source of the voice. A bulb flashed and a grinning man appeared from behind the camera.

"Nice one!" he said cheerfully, offering a thumbs-up before turning and hurrying away.

Tom cursed under his breath, slinging his bag onto the back seat and getting into the car.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

---

STEPPING from the bank onto his boat, something he had done thousands of times, felt profoundly odd this time. Tom unlocked the door and was met by a waft of stale air sucked out of the interior by the draught. Unable to remember the last time he was here, for it must have been months ago, he descended the stairs into the darkness below. Reaching for the nearest light switch, he flicked it on only to remain standing in the gloom. Power to the boat was provided by a small generator, with the excess being stored in battery packs. Having not been here, the packs had drained and he'd need to fire up the diesel generator.

He placed the bag of shopping he'd picked up from the convenience store on the way over on the small table. Rooting around beneath the sink, he found the torch and headed deeper into the hull to where the generator was housed. Luckily, it still had fuel, otherwise he would have been stuffed for the night. Priming the genny, he pulled the cord and the motor chugged. It took four more attempts for him to rediscover the knack required to get it running. A shaft of light passed underneath the door to the compartment behind him. Returning to the galley, he was pleased to see he'd left the fridge open when he'd decamped to Alice's house. One time he'd gone on holiday, the power failed, and he returned to a scene reminiscent of something from a post-apocalyptic film.

The fridge was whirring away as he loaded it with the basics he'd come back with: milk, butter, cheese and a couple of salad packs. Looking behind him towards the bedroom, he realised he'd have to make the bed up. None of this made him feel comfortable. He still had the nagging feeling that he was running out on them. Thinking of Saffy only made it worse. Stifling a

yawn, he filled the kettle and set it to boil. He would make a cup of tea after making the bed.

He heard something above. He waited, turning his ear towards where he thought the sound originated. The kettle rocked on its base, rumbling. He switched it off. The sound tailed away and still he waited. There it was again. Someone was nearby, but not passing. They were up on deck. No one knew he was here. How could they? He didn't know himself until an hour ago. Looking across the galley to the stairs, he eased himself in that direction as quietly as he could. Keeping an eye on the narrow windows above, he tried in vain to catch a hint of movement to indicate where the person was. There was no sign. It might be Cassie. That was a long shot. If she wanted to take him up on his offer of borrowing his boat, she would have spoken to him about it, not just turned up.

Climbing the stairs, Tom considered the person might be lying in wait for him to appear. That was the paranoia whispering in his mind. It could just as easily be a neighbour checking to see who was on his boat, knowing he hadn't been around much recently. A fleeting hope that it was Alice came to mind, but he dismissed it immediately. She'd never leave Saffy at home, nor drag her across Norfolk to where his boat was moored.

In the end, he dispensed with stealth and flung the doors open, stepping out and passing the beam of his torch around the deck.

"Who's there? Step out!" he said.

Movement to his left, in the corner of his eye, made him swivel and train the beam on an ashen-faced woman. She blinked furiously at the glare of the beam, holding up her palm to shield her eyes.

"I'm... I'm sorry," she said, still blinking. "I didn't mean to startle you."

He turned the light away to her left and she appeared somewhat relieved. He didn't know her, he was sure of that.

"Who are you and what are you doing on my boat?"

"You are Tom Janssen, aren't you?" she asked tentatively, leaning to one side as she assessed him. He nodded. "I'm sorry, I know you don't know me but my name is Carol Martins. Adrian Gage was my brother."

---

TOM SET the mug down in front of her. She acknowledged the offering with a flicker of a smile and cupped it with both hands. He could see how pale her hands were, as was her face. She must have been standing out there in the dark for quite some time. It was June and when the sun came out it was warm but, after sunset, with the cool breeze coming in off the sea, the nights were still chilly. That would change within the next few weeks, but for now early summer was proving changeable and disappointing.

Tom sat down at the table opposite her, blowing the steam from his own mug of tea. The box had been left open and he feared the bags would have dried out making the brew undrinkable, but it seemed okay. The water tasted a little odd but maybe he'd got used to what was pumped into Alice's.

"What can I do for you, Mrs..?"

She nodded. "Yes, it's Mrs... for now at least. But I'd rather you just called me Carol."

He recognised the tone in that statement. It spoke volumes and he must have said similar when his marriage broke down.

"What brings you here, Carol? I'm sure you'll understand that, even if I was on your brother's case, which I'm not, I wouldn't be able to discuss specifics with you—"

She waved away his statement. "I know. That much is obvious. And, anyway, that's not why I'm here."

"How did you find me?"

She smiled then, warm and genuine. "Maybe I should be a detective."

He wasn't pleased with the answer. He'd always been careful with his personal information since he'd been in the job. Most officers were, ensuring they weren't listed in telephone directories and that type of thing. She must have read his mind. She leaned in a little closer, still cupping her mug with her hands.

"It's a small town, Inspector Janssen. Everyone knows everyone else's business. It's always been that way, and I'm damn sure it will never change. Besides, Ade told me." She sank back in her chair, lifting her mug to her lips and sipping at the brew. If she thought it tasted funny, he couldn't tell.

"Your brother was checking up on me?"

She smiled again, her expression taking on a faraway look. She was younger than her brother. He would put her in her late twenties, thirty at the most. There would be quite an age gap between the two of them. She was slightly built, much as he was, but where he was darker skinned with deep

brown eyes, she was quite the opposite. She had piercing blue eyes that could have been fashioned from crystal and wore her blonde hair in a bob, longer at the front and rising to the rear. She didn't appear to have taken too much care in her appearance today, however. She wore no make-up and judging from the cut of her hair and the painted fingernails, he guessed she would usually. She held onto the mug as if it gave her strength. Perhaps it was a token to cling to. She glanced nervously across the table at him.

"Ade was a pretty good investigative journalist. I'll bet he would have given you a run for your money in an investigation."

Tom smiled at the sentiment. Judging by the scoops attached to his name, she was probably right. And he wouldn't have had the benefit of the judiciary and a warrant card to help him.

"Besides," she said, "you don't think he would let his daughter be around any bloke without checking him out first. Wouldn't you?"

Tom let out a small laugh. Carol matched it with one of her own.

"Yes, I suppose I would," he said, nursing his own mug.

A moment of silence passed between them. Tom was happy to give her space and time. Although it had been a trying day, culminating in a conclusion he would never have seen coming, he didn't feel it likely he would get a lot of sleep tonight. Besides, the bed would feel a lot larger and, he was certain, colder than usual.

"The word is that you've arrested someone for Ade's murder," she said, flicking her eyes up over the rim of the mug as she went to drink from it.

He shook his head. "That's premature."

"Word is it's Alice."

He felt her eyes on him, fixing him with a piercing stare and trying hard to gauge his reaction. Exactly what he would usually be doing. He remained stony-faced. She pressed him.

"Have you? Arrested Alice, I mean."

He shook his head. "Speaking to someone is not the same as arresting them."

"But you've spoken to her? Alice *is* a suspect?"

He drew breath, then took a mouthful of tea in order to give himself time to figure out the best way to manage the situation. Carol inferred her own analysis of his silence.

"The fact you're here," she said, rubbing briefly at the base of her nose, "suggests to me that she is. Tell me I'm wrong."



He wasn't going to confirm or deny anything. It wasn't proper and, besides that, he wouldn't want to risk pouring fuel on the fire of local gossip. He shook his head.

"I wouldn't read too much into my being here. Alice was close to your brother and I am close to the investigation team. It makes sense for us to... have a bit of breathing space under the circumstances. Otherwise, people might get the wrong idea."

"I think you'll find they won't need much to do that," she scoffed. "No matter what you do. It's the way of the world these days."

He couldn't disagree with that.

"Do you think she is capable of doing such a thing?" he asked, turning the focus back on her. "I mean, the two of you were good friends once."

Carol looked beyond Tom, staring at a nondescript point on the wall.

"I see Alice has been talking." She met Tom's eye, tapping her fingers against the side of her mug. "Yes, we were. Seems like a long time ago now."

"So?"

"Do I think it? No," she said, shaking her head. "But I've been wrong about people before." She looked directly at him. Focussed. "I seem to remember thinking the two of them were a perfect match. I was wrong there too."

He sat forward, resting his elbows on the table and putting his hands together before him.

"Why *are* you here? And I doubt it's because you're seeking confirmation of Alice's arrest. You could drive past her house and work that one out."

"Something Ade said to me a while back."

"If you have information related to the case, you should speak to the investigating officers and—"

"No!" she said. He was surprised by her aggressive reaction. She softened it almost immediately. Holding both her hands up by way of an apology but keeping the heels of her palms flat on the table. "No. I'll speak to you. I trust you and only you."

Tom was surprised. It must have shown.

"Ade told me you were reliable, that he believed you were one of the good guys."

Tom was even more surprised now. He could count on one hand the occasions where he'd met Adrian Gage, and most of those were seeing each other from a distance when Adrian was dropping off Saffy, Tom being in the house and him being in the car. They could barely have shared more than a dozen words.

Carol smiled. "Don't get me wrong. He hated the fact you got to live with his daughter... let alone his wife." She grimaced, inclining her head off to one side and reaching out to touch the back of his hand by way of an apology. "Ex-wife. Habit. Sorry."

He waved away the apology. There was no need. "But he respected you. What you do as well as the type of man you are."

He raised his eyebrows. Carol's smile grew ever wider.

"I didn't think we had a lot in common."

"Aside from the two most important women in both your lives?"

He had to concede that.

"Ade knew how good you were with Sapphire. He used to beat himself up for his own failings, made worse by how natural you made it look."

Tom was stunned. He always had Adrian down as akin to a deadbeat father, always letting his daughter down and appearing disinterested.

"You see, my brother tried. It might not look like it from a distance," she saw Tom's micro expression. "Or from up close, perhaps. But he did care. He so wanted to be a good dad... and a great husband. I just think he went about it all the wrong way. The story of his life from infant to adult, if you like. He grew up with a strong sense of justice instilled in him by our father, who was a human rights lawyer by trade. A good one too. I remember when I was eleven or twelve, Ade must have been eighteen, nineteen, something like that, and he was obsessed with the inequality in the world. He seemed to want to take it on, like it was some kind of divine cause only he was destined for. Had he been born a century or two earlier, I dare say he would have ended up a missionary somewhere in Africa. Ultimately, he put that mission ahead of his family. Ahead of Alice and Sapphire."

"How do you mean?"

"Ade wasn't one to back down. He threw himself at anything he thought was a just cause, no matter what it took. He was out to save the world one investigation at a time. That brought... trouble his way," she said glumly, bobbing her head in agreement with herself it seemed. "He's taken a few beatings over the years. It's an occupational hazard when you're an

investigative journalist wading knee-deep in human garbage. But when he married Alice, and particularly when Sapphire came along, things changed for him."

"They do when you have kids—"

"No, that's not what I mean," she said, shaking her head. "Going about his work as Ade used to, both Alice and Sapphire became targets in their own right."

Tom exhaled. He was seeing Adrian in a different light, one he'd never imagined possible – caring and responsible. Secretly, he didn't like it having spent so long disliking the man. Carol continued.

"Alice never really understood how he sought to keep his professional world separate from his family. He had to, to keep them safe. He's such... was such a poor communicator, I don't blame Alice for getting sick of him. From experience, I can tell you he's a bugger to live with at times. In the end I wasn't surprised when they split. Only that it was Ade who walked out."

"Because of the arguing?" Tom asked. He hadn't heard any of this before. Alice and he had never really discussed their respective failed marriages. It was an unwritten rule they held to.

"No. He felt he had to in order to keep them safe. The more distant he was from them, the less likely anyone would seek to hurt them to get to him. That was his logic anyway. Although, I believe he came to regret it in the end. That's why he was doing what he was doing."

"Which was?" Tom asked, his head spinning at the amount of information currently shattering his perception of the man.

"One last case. One final scoop that would make the nationals... and then he was done with it."

"With the job?"

"With all of it," she said. "He wanted out. He'd had enough, but with one last hurrah he could land a desk job somewhere, perhaps editing. Who knows? But he wanted to make changes, try to undo the damage he'd done. Make amends and put things right."

Tom took a deep breath. "And Alice?"

Carol met his eye, her lips pursed. She seemed pained at having to say so. "He wanted Alice back. To be part of her's and Sapphire's life again. To be a family like they should have been for the last eight years."

Tom felt his stomach turn, but he held firm.

"And what did Alice have to say about this?"

Carol shook her head. "That I don't know. But knowing Ade... he is persistent... and could be manipulative when it came to getting what he wanted. He was a good guy, my brother, and I loved him very much, but at the same time he could be a shit. Your presence wouldn't have stopped him from trying to get them back. Not for a second."

Tom found himself harbouring a weird sensation. On the one hand he was angry, fearful of what may have been going on without his knowledge, and, at the same time, feeling relieved that it had come to an end. Gage was no longer a threat to his relationship with Alice. A relationship? That thought risked spiralling out of control in his mind. He pushed it aside.

"If he wanted her back," Tom said, "and would go to great lengths to achieve it. I see no reason for Alice to have... to have killed him. Do you?"

"She shrugged. "No. I agree with you."

"So why are you here?"

She reached into her jacket pocket, producing a folded-up piece of paper. She handed it to him, indicating with her eyes for him to open it. It was folded into quarters. Opening it up, it was a handwritten note. He looked at Carol, asking a question with his eyes. She confirmed it with a nod.

"It's Ade's handwriting."

Tom looked at it. It simply said: *If anything happens give this to Tom Janssen*. Tom frowned, flipping the paper over and looking at the reverse. It was blank. The paper was A6 in size and appeared to have been torn from a pad where the sheets were glued at the top. A blue band ran the full width of the paper at the top, but it had been ripped awkwardly at an angle, probably as it was torn from the pad. He looked at Carol, holding the paper aloft.

"Why bring this to me?" She shook her head, indicating she didn't know. "Have you any idea what it means?"

"I'm sorry, I've no idea. I was hoping you might be able to tell me." She looked at him expectantly but he had to disappoint her. It had him stumped. "I found it at my place over the weekend. I was out with friends and I'd forgotten we were supposed to hang out. He must have waited for me, for a while. We have keys to each other's houses so we can come and go as we like."

"You're close?"

"Yes, very. I found the note when I got in the next day. I was going to ask him about it, but he didn't pick up when I called," she said, her eyes glazing over. "Now I know why."

Tom put the piece of paper down, running a hand across the side of his face and following through to the back of his neck. His stress headache was getting worse.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

---

TOM ENTERED the ops room to find it empty. He was surprised. Not that he was running late, although his morning routine had proved sluggish, what with being on the boat for the first time in months. Those jobs he'd been putting off, fixing the drain on the shower, servicing the generator, were coming back to haunt him. Not only that, but because the battery packs had drained completely, and not been used, they appeared to not be holding their charge anymore. These issues were easily fixable, but problems he could do without. The cold shower certainly woke him up.

His night's sleep had been better than in recent days, though. Why that might be he had considered on the drive into the station. Logic would dictate he should have had yet another restless night, what with the previous day's events. Perhaps the certainty that came with having to leave Alice's offered him a break from the stress of thinking about it all. Or possibly, which was more likely, the visit from Adrian Gage's sister had distracted him enough for the fatigue to take over. Either way, his state of mind was broadly calm as long as he didn't think too much about it.

Taking the piece of paper from his pocket, folded safely in a plastic evidence bag, he hung up his coat and walked over to the boards on the wall, casting an eye over the Gage case. He'd hoped to hand the note Adrian left for him over to either Cassie or Tamara first thing but there was no sign of them.

"Morning Tom."

He turned to see Eric entering and smiled. "Morning Eric." The constable's computer was the only one up and running, so he must have ducked out for a moment. "Does Becca turf you out early every day?"

Eric smiled. To all intents and purposes, he had moved out of his mother's house and in with his girlfriend a few months ago. Eric was predominantly a happy soul, naturally prone to a smile rather than a frown. Since moving in with his partner, he'd only grown in confidence.

"Something like that. Becca likes to get to the school early, especially this year since they gave her, her own class." Becca had been working as a teaching assistant at a local primary school whilst working towards her own qualifications as a teacher. She'd completed her studies. "All of which means if I want a decent shower and to get myself ready, and be on time for work, then I need to get up before her."

Tom inwardly grinned. Eric was very much a twenty-something for the modern age. He was always well presented, more so than just seeking a professional appearance, looking like a catalogue model and not one from an average high-street department store either. Eric wore branded clothes, not in a way to show off, for that wasn't his motivation at all, but he took pride in his appearance and having met Becca a few times, they were well suited. Tom often wondered if it was a love of fashion for Eric, but he thought not. The young detective had a boyish outward appearance and was quick with a smile or a joke. He wasn't overly tall, but powerfully built, with a smooth unblemished complexion. This youthful look, and the enthusiastic approach to life, made him seem younger than he was and it was this that Tom thought might motivate him to dress as he did, in order to reinforce his maturity.

Recently Eric had tried to grow a beard, and failed, which added weight to Tom's theory. Eric wanted to be taken seriously, not necessarily by his colleagues, because he was highly regarded, but by the public at large. In Tom's opinion, he needn't worry.

"Have you seen either Cassie or Tamara this morning?"

Eric shook his head. "No, not yet. I don't know where they are. Maybe they're running something down first thing," Eric said, glancing around. "Do you want me to call one of them and find out?"

"No, don't worry," he said, slipping the folded bag into his trouser pocket. "It can wait until they come in."

"Right you are," Eric said. "Listen, I had a thought after we spoke with Daniel Crowe yesterday." Tom perched himself on the edge of a desk, folding his arms and encouraging him to continue. "We're trying to figure out if Crowe, or anyone else for that matter, stood to gain from Mary

Beckett's death, right? To that end, I looked into Beckett's action group to see how successful they've been in trying to block the development of the wind farm."

"The switching station," Tom said, correcting him. As far as he understood, it wasn't the wind farm itself that had problems.

"Yes, of course. I looked up the company which has acquired the licence to develop the project. They have set up an office in Wells. Presumably because the quay will be required for dealing with the offshore infrastructure, much as it is for Sheringham Shoal."

"Good. What have you found out about them?"

"That they have three proposed locations for the siting of the switching station. The preferred one, plus the second, is on Daniel Crowe's land. There is a third choice, but as I understand it, it isn't one they want to use if at all possible, but I don't know why. I thought it might be worth speaking to them directly, just to weigh up how much of a problem Beckett has been. If they don't see obtaining planning consent being an issue, then Crowe doesn't really have a motive."

Tom ran his tongue along the edge of his lower lip. Eric had a good point. Alternatively, should the company be facing having to relocate construction to a different site, one not owned by Crowe, then more weight might be put behind Crowe as a suspect.

"Call ahead. Make us an appointment to see whoever is in charge."

"We have one at nine-thirty," Eric said, smiling. "Liam Hansell, the company's liaison locally, is expecting us."

---

AN ALMOST INAUDIBLE beep sounded and the receptionist picked up the phone in front of her, glancing across at Tom and Eric as she spoke. They were sitting in a waiting area adjacent to the front office. The place had the feel of a pop-up establishment. Hastily erected panelled walls, melamine coated judging by the sheen and reflection they offered, were softened by large planters, containing four-foot high bamboo or fern-like foliage, carefully positioned in the spaces. The sofas they were sitting on were fake leather, made to resemble the ever-fashionable range of seating designed by



Mies van der Rohe, but Tom figured they came from a popular Scandinavian furniture store at a fraction of the cost.

The receptionist rose from behind her desk, Tom and Eric doing likewise. Their appointment was scheduled for fifteen minutes earlier and they'd been ten minutes early for that.

"Mr Hansell will see you now," she said, gesturing towards the stairs. The office was located in a converted warehouse a stone's throw from the old quay at the centre of Wells. It was a shared space, utilised by a number of firms, but none of them was particularly large. Tom found himself wondering when, and not if, this building would be converted into apartments like so many similar local ones from the era had been.

They made their way upstairs to the next level, greeted upon reaching the top by a tall, slender man who shot them a welcoming smile. He was in his late forties, slightly taller than Tom himself, which was unusual. He lacked Tom's bulk though, being quite gangly in the arms and legs. He offered his hand, Tom took it. The shake wasn't firm and he didn't meet Tom's eye as they made contact. Instead, he looked at Eric, nodding a greeting as Tom introduced them.

"Come through, please," Hansell said, turning and leading them into his office.

The room had a similar feel to the downstairs. It was spartanly furnished with a single desk, chair and a couple of filing cabinets pushed against one wall.

"What can I do for Norfolk's finest?" Hansell said, a broad smile on his face as he sat forward in his chair, resting his forearms on the desk in front of him. Tom found it difficult to place his accent. It had a London or Thames Valley twang to it, but at the same time the intonation of some sounds seemed to be more continental European inflections. Hansell was a pale man with red cheeks and fine, wispy blonde hair brushed back from his forehead. His eyes flitted between Tom and Eric from behind thick glasses.

"We're investigating a murder, Mr Hansell."

The smile dissipated and his lips parted as he looked directly at Tom, holding his gaze for the first time since they met.

"And there is the suggestion that the murder might be related to the proposed construction of the planned Norfolk Wash Wind Farm."

Hansell shook his head ever so slightly. "I... a murder you say? I really don't see..." He stopped, took a breath and steadied himself. "How is it

related?"

"We understand there has been some push-back from certain members of the community opposed to the siting of a switching station."

Hansell visibly relaxed, biting his lower lip and sucking air through his teeth. He nodded. "Yes, there has been a degree of opposition, that's true. They are a minority, though. A very vocal minority, it has to be said." He frowned, looking directly at Tom. "I'm sorry, who did you say died?"

"I didn't," Tom said. "A lady named Mary Beckett."

Hansell sat back in his chair, his mouth falling open as he briefly looked to the ceiling before his eyes came back to rest on Tom. "Mary. Good Lord."

"And she was murdered."

"Yes," Hansell said, raising his eyebrows and making an O with his lips as he breathed out. "When was this? Recent, I presume."

Tom exchanged a glance with Eric, who also seemed to find it surprising he hadn't heard. There had been nothing else reported in the news locally for days besides the Gage and Beckett murders. There were precious few cases like this in Norfolk for much of the time and two murders, particularly ones so close together, were highly unusual. Hansell must have understood the unsaid communication passing between them.

"I went home at the tail end of last week, Inspector. I only got back Monday lunchtime. I did catch something on the news, but it was on in the background. Mary Beckett, you say? That's a surprise."

"Why would you say that?"

"Oh... well, why would anyone want to hurt Mary?"

"Perhaps someone who had something to lose from her campaigning?"

Hansell smiled nervously. "Well, maybe. Yes, I can see why you might think so. Mary Beckett might well be a thorn in the side of people like me... but it's not worth killing someone over."

"We understand she was actively opposed to your plans. Also, that she'd galvanised numerous people to oppose you."

"Hmm... yes. Also true," Hansell said, screwing up his face. "But we are confident the inspectorate will uphold our approval."

"So, she had success then, delaying your construction?" Eric asked, glancing at Tom, looking fearful for stepping in. Tom didn't mind. He watched Hansell for his reaction.

"Her pressure group hasn't delayed construction, not really," Hansell said, frowning. "Contracts are ready to be signed with manufacturers as soon as the permission is sealed. The wind farm itself is not in dispute, merely where we bring the power to land." He shook his head emphatically. "No, no. There's not an issue. As soon as the approval is rubber stamped, we are off and running."

"And what of Mary Beckett herself. How did you get on with her personally?" Tom asked.

Hansell put his hands together before him, making a tent with his fingers. "She was a... prickly character, but passionate. I think that's fair to say. She really was the driving force behind the campaign. She was very dedicated to the natural world. We have that in common."

Tom raised an eyebrow. Hansell waved away his scepticism. "That's why I work in renewables! We need to shift away from carbon-based energy to something more sustainable. We might have disagreed on site locations, but Mary and I were on the same page with almost everything else."

"Fair point," Tom said. "And regarding the proposed site for the switching station. Where are you with that?"

"Good to go. The lawyers have done their bit, we are just waiting on that final confirmation."

"And Daniel Crowe, has he been applying pressure as far as you're aware? We know he had quite a public falling out with Mary Beckett at a planning meeting."

"The consultation?" Hansell asked. Tom nodded and Hansell mirrored the action. "Yes, I was there that night. The whole idea was for me to reassure the locals and to promote the positives to the area for the proposal. To get everyone on side, so to speak. It... didn't really go to plan. Mary didn't seem like the type to change her mind."

"Excuse me," Eric said, "but what exactly is it that the group are upset about?"

Hansell exhaled heavily. "There is a stretch of land the cables will need to pass through to reach the switching station. They'll be buried, so they won't be seen but in order to lay them we will need to excavate the area. These are habitats for nesting wild birds."

"That doesn't sound too bad," Eric said, looking from Hansell to Tom.

Hansell angled his head to one side, spreading his palms wide as he spoke. "Sadly, the heavy plant will create a trench thirty metres wide, shifting thousands of tonnes of soil and ripping out all the surface vegetation. To be fair, there won't be much left afterwards, even though we would work to reinstate what we... destroy."

Eric frowned. "Okay, that sounds worse."

"I'm afraid it is collateral damage... but what's needed in the name of progress."

"We heard similar from someone else recently," Tom said. Hansell looked at him, trying to read more into the comment, but Tom remained impassive. "So, aside from Daniel Crowe obviously, who else stands to gain from Mary Beckett's death? Presuming of course that the effectiveness of the pressure group recedes after her death."

Hansell looked visibly shocked. "No one, Inspector." Tom fixed him with a stare. "Honestly. Even if, and I see this as very unlikely, the site for the switching station is relocated, the wind farm itself is still viable. We will just relocate. We have nothing to gain from Mary's death. There might be an administration headache, but we're used to that. This is what we do. NIMBY-ism has been around forever and we have plans to deal with it. It's built into the model."

"Okay, thank you," Tom said, indicating to Eric they should leave. Standing up, Tom walked to the door. Hansell got there first and opened it for them. Tom paused as he went through, looking back at him. "By the way, where is home?"

"Excuse me?"

"You said you went home last week. Where is that?"

"Copenhagen. My partner and I live there."

"That explains the accent," Tom said. "I couldn't place it."

Hansell smiled, keeping one hand on the edge of the door. "Fourteen years I've lived out there now. So, yes, that's how I've developed this slightly odd twist to my accent. I'm one of those who adopts things wherever I go."

Tom thanked him again, and he and Eric headed downstairs. He acknowledged the receptionist with a brief wave as they passed out into the street. Once clear of the building, Tom nudged Eric with his elbow.

"Take a deeper look into the company would you."

Eric bobbed his head. "You think he's keeping something from us? It all sounded plausible."

"Yes it did, and he might be on the level, but there's something about him that bothers me."

"What's that?"

Tom stopped, looking back at the building. A panel was fixed to the wall listing the names and logos of each of the businesses located in the premises. The newest name written in white on a blue background was at the bottom, Prometheus Energy Limited. "He was... amiable, but at the same time nervous and, to my mind, evasive. I don't know, he just unsettled me. For someone so confident, supposed to be the man for liaising with people... I don't know. Just take a look. Put my mind at rest."

"Will do," Eric said.

"I also think we should go back to Janet Beckett, and perhaps her son Justin, and run a few things past them. See if any of the names we're looking at came up in conversation with Mary recently. Come on, let's head back to the station. I need to speak with Tamara about something."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

---

CASSIE KNIGHT MUTTERED a curse as she rounded the corner and her coffee spilled over the lip of the cup, scolding her fingers.

"Sorry, DS Knight. I didn't catch that."

"Oh, sorry. Doesn't matter," she said, looking at the tips of her fingers and seeing no obvious sign of damage, but it stung like hell. Why were these cups made so flimsy anyway? At least the old polystyrene ones came with a lid to seal them. These vending cups were ridiculous. "I was talking to myself anyway. What were you saying?"

The technician continued with the explanation of his findings. She listened, but at the same time she couldn't help but think he must be single. No one, man or woman, would be able to feign interest in someone with such a monotone voice and an inability to convey a clear message. She was no stranger to forensics; with a degree in biology herself she figured she had a better understanding of science than most, but even she was losing this particular thread.

"Sorry, what was that last bit?"

"Er... which part? The Raman measurement analysis or the studying of the fibres under polarised light—"

"Yes, that part," Cassie said. "Can you clarify what I think you just said?"

"The analysis provided a positive."

"You've been able to match it? The strands of fibre are a match, you're sure?"

"Well, yes. As sure as we can be to within a margin—"

"Great. Can you email me a copy of the report as soon as you can?"

"I'll do it right now."

Cassie thanked him and hung up, slipping the mobile into her pocket. She switched hands with the coffee cup, wiping her left on the side of her jacket and re-examining the fingers. Raising the cup to her mouth, she blew the steam off the top whilst thinking through what she'd learnt from the call. It was what she expected, but not what she'd hoped for. This would cause ructions. The coffee was rank with a blotchy scum sitting on the surface, similar to what you get if you leave tea brewing too long. But this was coffee.

Resuming her walk up the stairs, she considered how to frame the news to Tamara. They would have to act, and soon. She considered calling her immediately but dismissed the thought. It was a conversation they should have in person. It could probably wait until Tamara got back from the errand she had to run anyway. Pushing open the double doors in the corridor, she turned immediately left and entered the CID ops room to find Tom standing in front of the information boards. The ones relating to the Gage murder and not Mary Beckett's.

He hadn't heard her walk in and her first reaction was shock. He wasn't casually eyeing the boards, he was reading through them like the SIO would. And he shouldn't be anywhere near them, not this time. He was concentrating so hard, his brow furrowed, that she was almost upon him when he noticed her. She startled him. It wasn't often that Tom ever appeared flustered, but this was one of those times. She nervously looked at where he was standing, trying to see what it was that he appeared so fixated on.

"Tom. Are you okay?" she asked, giving up on any pretence of subtlety. "You look like you've seen a ghost." She wanted him to know, to feel uncomfortable. However, he seemed unperturbed.

"Hi Cass. Where's Tamara?"

He sounded flat, distracted. He couldn't know what she did, so what had he seen? She glanced at the boards again.

"On an errand. She'll be back."

Tom nodded, his eyes drifting back to the board.

"Is there..." she said, leaning to one side so she would appear in his eye line. He looked at her blankly. "... anything I can help you with?"

"I had a visitor last night," Tom said, and it was as if a light switch went on and he snapped back to the present. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he

produced an evidence bag and passed it to her. She examined it. "It was Adrian Gage's sister."

"What's this mean?" she asked, reading the note. It was incredibly cryptic and seemed to be written in haste. Tom shrugged. "Did she confirm it was her brother's handwriting?"

"Yes, she says so. She found it when she got in after a night out. I don't think she thought much of it until later. She has a key to his place and he hers. Have you met her?"

She nodded. "Yes, we had her carry out the identification. What did you make of her?"

Tom frowned. "Seemed on the level to me. Just as stumped by the note as I am."

Cassie re-examined it once more. It was an odd thing to write, particularly as this was his ex-wife's new partner.

"And you've had no contact with him?"

Tom shook his head. "No. Only in passing. I've no idea why he left it for me."

The thought came to her that it might be a warning of sorts, but she chose not to voice it. It was strange, though, that Carol Martins, the victim's brother, would take the note to Tom rather than mention it to either her or Tamara when they met. She hadn't offered them anything insightful at all to work with.

"Thanks," she said, smiling. "I'll look into it."

"Maybe you should have a word with Carol again, see if she's remembered anything since she spoke to me—"

"Yeah, thanks," Cassie said. "Like I say, I'll check it out."

Tom's eyes narrowed and she turned away from him and headed over to her desk, putting the bag down and shaking her mouse to bring her computer out of hibernation.

"I figured the paper was torn from a notepad, perhaps one of those made by companies with a logo across the top. It might be beyond the tear—"

"Tom!" she said, as sternly as she dared, looking at him and pursing her lips. "I said I'll look into it, and I will. Okay?"

He didn't seem pleased. Had she overstepped the mark? Not in her mind. That was entirely on him.

"Is there a problem?"



She was busily fumbling with paperwork on her desk, well aware she was trying to avoid a confrontation. He took a half-step towards her.

"Cassie, is there something on your mind?"

She thrust the paperwork down onto her tray at the side of her desk. "Well, seeing as you mention it, yes."

"Then I suggest you get it out of your system while no one else is here," he said, gesturing around the room.

"Tom, you're not supposed to be involved in this case—"

"Carol Martins came to me!"

"And the information boards..." she said, pointing at them, "did they come to you as well?"

He looked away, biting his bottom lip, all but confirming her suspicion he'd had more than a passing interest in what they were looking into.

"Are you trying to compromise this investigation?"

"No of course I'm not!"

"Well you're doing a good job of it."

She registered a flicker of a reaction in his expression. Was it anger, frustration? She couldn't tell. He was certainly irritated with her.

"Look," she said, adopting a more conciliatory tone, laying her hands on the desk and looking down, "I get it, okay. I really do. You're close to this and... and that's exactly why you shouldn't be getting involved." He looked about to protest, but she continued before he was able. "And it's not just paying too much attention to the case notes." She pointed at the board. Tom followed with his eyes, shaking his head. "You're putting me in a position, not just me but the DCI as well. Even Eric, I expect."

He frowned. "What position?"

"Of having to cover for you, that's what!"

"You don't need to cover for me—"

"Well, that's just it. We will, won't we. Because you're one of us and we care about what happens to you."

He sighed, looking up to the ceiling and running a hand through his hair. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes and then looked at her.

"Could you keep out of it, if you were in my place?"

The obvious answer was yes. However, he was right. She wouldn't, not if it was her partner and she believed in her. But, by the same token, she'd fully expect Tom and the others to put her in her place, however uncomfortable the experience might be. She thought about it. Whatever she

said, she had the sense he wouldn't back away. She lowered her voice to barely above a whisper, looking around to check she wouldn't be overheard despite them being the only two present.

"Just be a bit more bloody subtle, would you? For all our sakes. Can you do that?"

"I can."

"Good. Where is Eric anyway?"

Tom scratched behind one ear, glancing sideways at the boards and then appearing to disengage from them entirely. "I have him running down some information on the company trying to build the Norfolk Wash Wind Farm as well as those tied financially to the success of the project. If anyone needs me, I'm heading out to speak to Mary Beckett's relatives again. See if I can jog their memories regarding Mary's activism."

Tom left and Cassie watched him go. Once he was out of ops, she walked over to the information boards, coming to stand where Tom had been. He could have been reading any of it, or all of it, but what jumped out at her was the mobile phone records pinned to the side of the board. The corresponding points on the map denoting where the phone had been connected to certain towers on the mobile network was alongside, listing times and dates. They were Alice's. The manager at Cley Windmill was correct. She had been visiting Adrian Gage's house frequently in recent weeks. She figured that'd come as news to Tom. No wonder he was so thrown.

Taking out her mobile, she called Tamara. It couldn't wait after all. She listened to three rings before the call cut to voicemail.

"Tamara, it's me. Forensics have come back on the Gage case and I need to talk to you about next steps. Call me back as soon as you get this, yeah."

She put her mobile down on the desk in front of her, turning her eye to the information boards. She sat back and sighed.

They were getting closer.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

---

TOM WAITED PATIENTLY in the sitting room of the Becketts' house. Despite repeated assurances he didn't want for anything, Janet Beckett insisted on making a pot of tea. Like the other rooms in the house he'd been into, this one carried the grandeur of the building, albeit in a slightly distressed way. An interior designer would no doubt refer to it as *shabby chic*, but it was primarily shabby with not so much of the chic.

Looking at his watch, Tom considered going to look for Janet in the kitchen. They could just as easily speak in there and he really didn't want a cup of tea, but he would accept one out of politeness. His mobile beeped and he glanced at the screen. It was a text from Alice. He hesitated before opening it, fearing the worst. A summons to collect his things, perhaps? Opening it, it was a short message, leaving a lot to ambiguity in one sense and clarity in another. *I miss you*. He noted she referred only to herself. Often that would have been *we*, and he knew Saffy would be missing him. The feeling was mutual. Towards both of them. What should he reply? What was she expecting him to do? The last they'd spoken, she'd told him to leave his house key.

He knew she hadn't meant it to be so final. At least, he hoped not. She was hurting. He hadn't helped. When someone is emotional or facing a period of intense stress, or both, they can feel vulnerable. In such a scenario some people will fold, retreat into themselves and try to shut everyone else out. Others will come out swinging. And one thing Alice could do was give a good account of herself. He always knew she was resilient, passing the gift onto her daughter, but he'd never known her to be so brutal. Not to him, at least.

His finger hovered over the reply symbol, his thoughts drifting back to the information boards on the ops room wall. The list of dates and times ran to the forefront of his mind. The calls, texts and GPS pinpointed occasions when Alice was at Adrian's home. Two of them stood out. The day of the murder and the five days before. On that day Alice was working late and he picked Saffy up from school. They'd eaten out, the two of them, something of a special trip to one of Saffy's favourite haunts, a soft-play activity centre, or soft-play hell as Tom likened it to. But Alice wasn't working late. She may not have been working at all according to the data. Maybe she'd finished early. Maybe Adrian wasn't spending the day convincing her to return to him. Maybe...

The door opened, the hinges protesting, and Janet Beckett entered backwards with a tray held in front of her. Tom put his mobile away and crossed to assist, taking the tray from her and carrying it to the coffee table. It was heavy. How she'd managed it, he wasn't sure. Setting it down, he saw there were three cups and the same number of side plates, spoons and an assortment of shop-bought cakes alongside the teapot.

"Are you expecting someone?" he asked.

"Oh yes. Justin is on his way over now. I telephoned him and he was keen to join us," Janet said, smiling warmly. The smile faded. "That is okay, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course."

He sat back down and Janet leaned forward from her chair, adding milk from a small china jug into two of the cups. She spoke without making eye contact, almost as an afterthought.

"I presumed you would like milk, Inspector Janssen."

"Yes, thank you."

"Good. I can't abide black tea myself, either. Even those flavoured teas are dreadful," she said, setting a cup and saucer down in front of him and pouring tea into the cup. "Mary was quite partial to the fruit-flavoured green teas, but not for me. Sugar?"

He shook his head, smiling. "No, thank you. Just the milk will be fine."

She passed him the cup and saucer, her hand wobbling as she did so. He wasn't sure if that was the strain of the weight being at an awkward angle or if she had motor function issues. She seemed in quite good health, so he guessed it was the former. He took the proffered cup, placing it down in front of him. He took out his notebook.

"Mrs Beckett, I'd like to run a few—"

"Cake?" she asked, smiling broadly and reaching for the dinner plate with a dozen or so mini cakes arranged neatly on it.

He shook his head. "No, thank you."

"Oh, you must. A big, strong man like yourself needs the calories."

He was about to decline once more when they both heard a car pull up outside. Janet rose and looked out through the bay window overlooking the driveway.

"Here's Justin."

Tom thought that was swift. He hadn't even been that quick to get here on the night his aunt's body was recovered from the sea. Janet sat down. She seemed more relaxed now. Previously, he had the impression she was going through the motions by presenting the façade of hospitality. Not that her efforts were necessarily disingenuous, but she seemed on edge. Then again, her sister, the person she had a strangely symbiotic adult relationship with, had just been murdered. Moments later, Justin entered the room, a sheen of perspiration on his head and looking more red-faced than on the last time they'd met suggesting to Tom the man needed to have his blood pressure levels checked.

"Inspector Janssen," Justin said, stepping forth and holding out his hand. Tom rose and took the offered hand. "You have news for us?" Tom shook his head and Justin appeared perplexed, speaking over Tom as he looked to his mother with a confused expression. "I thought perhaps you'd made an arrest." He sounded optimistic and hopeful. "Or maybe arrested a suspect?"

"No, I'm afraid not. We're still investigating at this time," Tom said. Justin reached for his mother's hand as he sat down beside her. She patted the back of it and set about pouring him a cup of tea as well.

"Mother?" Justin said, his eyes narrowing. "You said there were developments... and I should come straight over—"

"Yes, dear. I know," Janet said, her lips tight, suppressing what Tom considered to be a contented smile. She looked at Tom. "But you do have news of a development, don't you, Inspector? That's why you're here, isn't it, to ask questions?"

"I would like to run a couple of names past you, if I may," Tom said. They both gave him their approval. "I must stress this is merely for background regarding what events Mary was engaged with. These are not suspects. I need to be clear, so that you understand."

Justin exchanged a quick glance with his mother and nodded. "Anything we can do to help, Inspector."

"Cake?" Janet said to Tom once more, raising her eyebrows and then reaching for a small plate and a napkin.

"No. Thank you," Tom said. Justin looked directly at Tom, subtly rolling his eyes. "Do either of you recall Mary mentioning a company by the name of Prometheus Energy?"

Mother and son exchanged a knowing look. It was Justin who answered.

"Yes, I'll say. Aunty hardly talked about anything else. Killing the reserve, she used to say. Repeatedly."

"I see. And did she ever have dealings with them outside of the community planning meetings that you know of?"

"Yes," Janet said. "One of their people came out here to see her once. He was polite enough, all smiles and a sharp suit." She shook her head. "Mary didn't like him. Nor did I if I'm honest. Smarmy. And a bit of a funny, if you ask me."

"A *funny*?" Tom asked.

"Yes, you know," she said, lowering her voice in a conspiratorial manner. "One of those. Funny."

Tom still didn't understand. Justin cleared his throat, not due to phlegm but more a sign of his embarrassment. "Please forgive my mother her... more colourful views on a person's... orientation."

Now Tom understood.

"Well," Janet said, her eyes flitting between her son and Tom, "some of them do make it obvious, don't they?"

Tom saw Justin cringe, internalising his horror.

"How did they get on?"

"He wasn't the type to impress Aunt Mary," Justin said. "She respects strength, valuing action, and this chap was all about persuasion and presentation. Aunty said he was a spiv. I think that was a little harsh on the chap."

"Yes, you were quite impressed with him as I recall," Janet said, glancing at her son and rolling her eyes. "He was just the sort that you aspire to be."

"Hardly, Mother," Justin said. "But he certainly rubbed Aunt Mary up the wrong way."

"You were close to your aunt?" Tom asked.

"Not really," he said. "We would talk... at least, I was talked at. Aunty was never particularly interested in other points of view." The last was said with apparent disdain. "Or not mine, at any rate."

"Nor mine," Janet said, echoing her son.

"Aunty had her views, her beliefs, and they were central to her personality. Her core being if you like. To argue a position counter to those beliefs would mean to criticise her very being."

Tom fixed Justin with a stare. "I'm sorry, are we still talking about the representative from Prometheus Energy or you?"

Justin looked away. Janet placed a supporting hand on her son's leg, patting his thigh gently.

"Mary was difficult, Inspector Janssen. She centred her life around what she believed in and set out to fight tooth and nail for what she thought was right. There was nothing that she would allow to get in the way of that, be it a person, organisation or—"

"Or... a logical counter argument to her position," Justin said, clasping his mother's hand. She glanced at him, smiling weakly.

"When you say *not allow*," Tom said, thinking about the threatening notes left for Robert Rutland, "what lengths do you think she would go to?"

Neither of them seemed willing to answer. He waited.

"Aunt Mary was quite a pragmatic soul, Inspector," Justin said. "She didn't see the grey areas, those in which most of us live in much of the time. She saw right and wrong. She was strongly placed in the *right* camp and everyone opposing her was not. No matter who they were."

"And the answer to my question is?"

"She would certainly use whatever she could to get her way," Janet said, not meeting his eye. Justin nodded slowly. He did meet Tom's gaze.

"She could be manipulative, Inspector. She would have given Machiavelli a run for his money. So, yes, she had issues with Prometheus Energy and I'm sure they knew of her."

"Right, thanks," Tom said, looking down and making a note. "What of Daniel Crowe, do you recall her speaking of him?"

"Another funny," Janet said, looking past Tom to a nondescript point on the wall and staring at it with a blank expression.

"Mother!"

She broke her gaze, looking sternly at her son, unapologetic. "Well, he is!" she said, shaking her head in dismay at his calling her out. "He may

well be married to his poor wife." She looked at Tom, wagging a finger pointedly. "Who is long-suffering but fully understands the trade-off she's made."

"Trade-off?"

"Yes," she scoffed. "The house, money..." she said, waving her hands in a circular motion before her. "And all of the foreign holidays. She understands completely. She offers him an air of respectability and in return he gets to do as he pleases. Like I said – a funny."

"Mother, you can be respectable... if... you are attracted to the same sex," Justin said, clearly frustrated. Tom gathered this was not an uncommon conversation between them. "I don't know how many times we have to speak about—"

"Funny!" she repeated.

Justin sighed, looking to the floor and wrapping his hands around the back of his head, interlocking his fingers. Janet was undeterred, dismissing Justin's admonishment, and appeared to be gathering pace. She turned to Tom.

"Well, let me tell you," she said, sitting forward, a gleam in her eyes, "no one is going to convince me that Daniel Crowe wasn't up to no good when he was caught with that young man in the supermarket car park that night. Hitchhiker be damned. Why your people let him off with a warning, I'll never know."

If Janet was right, and Daniel Crowe did lead a double life of sorts, then it could well have been used against him by someone seeking to manipulate him for their own ends. From what Robert Rutland had said, now seemingly backed up by members of her own family, but not as directly, it would appear Mary Beckett could be capable of doing just that. If true, it gave Daniel Crowe a deeper motive than just financial gain.

"Do you have any suspects, Inspector?" Justin asked, sitting upright and moving on from his reaction to his mother's comments. Tom figured there was something more going on between them, more than merely opposing views. "I know you can't give out specifics, I've seen the shows on the television. But do you?"

Tom tried to sound reassuring. There was nothing concrete to tell them, not that he would if there was at this stage. "Inquiries are ongoing," he said. "I understand why you're asking, and as soon as I have news for you, I promise you will hear it before anything is released to the media."



"Right. Yes, of course," Justin said, despondent. "Inquiries ongoing. They say that too."

Tom smiled. "Don't believe everything you see on the crime shows. They are made only to entertain."

Justin frowned. "I've always loved watching the crime shows. It's not so entertaining when you're living one."

Tom understood. He put his pocketbook away and made ready to leave.

"But you haven't drunk your tea," Janet said, appearing overly distressed.

Tom reached down and picked up his cup, sipping politely at the brew. Smiling, he put the cup down and thanked her for her hospitality. She peered over the rim of his cup on the table, assessing how much was left. It was still two thirds full. It had not tasted good.

"I'll see you out," Justin said, releasing his mother's hand and standing up. The two men walked to the front door. Once they were along the corridor and into the entrance hall, Justin touched Tom's elbow to get his attention. He lowered his voice, clearly hoping to ensure his mother wouldn't overhear them. "I'm terribly sorry about my mother—"

Tom waved away the apology. "There's no need, really."

"Oh, I think there is. Please don't think ill of her. She was just born of a different generation."

Tom considered that thought. His parents were of the same generation, and neither of them cared a jot about another's sexuality. The different generation argument was often cited, and could be argued, but for him it didn't hold up.

"Don't worry, Mr Howell."

"Justin, please."

"Don't worry, I'm not here to investigate people's personal views, whether I agree with them or not is irrelevant. I'm looking for your aunt's killer. That's where I'll focus my energy."

"It's not just that, Inspector," Justin said, looking back over his shoulder. "Mother has... is going the same way as her sister. The same way many of the family do when they get older." He all but whispered the last. "I wouldn't put too much stock in the things she says... her memory is not what it used to be."

Tom understood the inference.

"It's one of the reasons I've been here so much. To keep an eye on them. She has good days and bad. Now that it's just Mother I have to look out for it should feel easier, but I'm only worrying more. Is that normal?"

Tom took a deep breath. He wasn't the best to advise. That would be better left to a medical practitioner. "You've all had quite a shock in the past few days, and there will no doubt be more to come, so it's probably inevitable that you'll be more... sensitive to your mother's needs."

"I wish she was more sensitive to mine."

"Excuse me?"

Justin dismissed his own comment by waving both hands and shaking his head. "Ignore me, Inspector. I'm just grumbling away to myself."

Tom reached for the handle, finding the door locked. Justin eased past him and turned the latch. The door wasn't locked but couldn't be opened from the outside without a key. Tom was certain he'd pulled it closed when he entered. Justin must have his own set of keys to the house. That was probably unsurprising based on what he'd just said. He pulled the door open and Tom stepped past him and out into the night. The sun had set, but the cloudless evening sky meant it was still light.

"Thanks again," Tom said, glancing back over his shoulder. The front door closed on him. Walking to his car, he noted Justin's car was parked alongside his. It was a red Volkswagen Golf, very similar to Alice's. The starting digits of the number plate were identical, meaning they'd both been bought locally. Unlocking his car, he glanced back towards the house as he got in. Janet Beckett was at the bay window. She was watching him leave, an impassive look on her face.

How different she had been today in comparison to the night of their first meeting. His mobile beeped and he took it out. There was another message from Alice, sent just after he'd received the last one earlier, but he hadn't noticed. He opened it up, the screen illuminating the car's interior in white light.

*Can I see you?*

He looked up Eric's number and called him. He answered quickly and Tom figured he was already home because the sounds of a kitchen were in the background. He heard a female voice, probably Becca's.

"Eric, how are you getting on with Prometheus Energy?"

"Erm... I'm only just getting started, really. I thought I'd carry on in the morning—"

"Yes, of course, that's fine," Tom said. He could almost hear Eric's relief on the line. "I've just got through talking to Janet Beckett and her son."

"Justin Howell?"

"That's the one. There was a suggestion that Daniel Crowe has an arrest in the past for solicitation, possibly related to a male prostitute. At least that's the insinuation. Justin got a little stressed about it all. Can you look into him for me?"

"Yes, sure. I'll do it first thing."

Someone mumbled a question in the background and Eric placed the receiver against his shoulder so his reply was muffled.

"Is there anything else you want me to do?" Eric asked, returning to the conversation.

"No, that's okay, Eric. I'll see you in the morning. What are you up to anyway?"

"Oh, Becca thinks I need to learn how to cook, so she's teaching me."

"Good luck, young man."

"Thanks," Eric said, then lowered his voice to a whisper. "I think I'll need it!"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

---

TAMARA GREAVE LOOKED at the display of her phone, pressing the red button and diverting the call to voicemail. She could speak to Cassie later. There was nothing so urgent that couldn't wait a little while longer. Alice reappeared from the kitchen with two mugs held in one hand and a packet of biscuits in the other. Tamara sat forward as Alice bent her knees and carefully lowered the mugs to the coffee table, thanking her host with a grateful smile. Alice held the packet up to show her. It was a packet of milk chocolate digestives.

"Sorry, this is all I have at the moment until I can get to the shops," Alice said. Tamara smiled politely. Alice opened the end of the pack and put it in the centre of the table. "These are Saffy's favourites."

"Solid choice."

Alice smiled and sat down in the armchair off to her right. "She hardly eats any others... and don't ever think you can swap out branded for supermarket own because she can tell. You'll never hear the end of it."

Tamara laughed. "I have several nieces and their parents can feel your pain, I'm sure."

Alice lifted her feet up onto the chair, drawing her knees to her chest and sitting side-on among the cushions.

"You've never fancied having children yourself?"

Tamara bit her lower lip, looking away.

"I'm so sorry," Alice said. "I didn't mean to—"

Tamara held up one hand as she reached for her mug with the other. "No need to apologise. It's a question I hear a lot from people. Friends and family. I'm used to it."

Alice looked nervous, perhaps fearing she'd touched on something private. Tamara sought to reassure her.

"It's not that I don't like children as such, only that I can't see myself as a mother." If the answer was what Alice expected to hear, she didn't react. She just nodded.

"My daughter is my whole world," Alice said, her expression taking on a faraway look. "I'd be lost without her."

Therein lay Tamara's problem, or one of them at least. She feared that level of responsibility. If she were to become a parent, she knew her life would have to radically change. That was probably the same for all parents to be fair. Change. That was something Tamara relished, much like upping sticks and moving across the country as she had done with her fiancé. But he was in her past. Would she be able to make such drastic moves with a child in tow? Or two? Surely not. And that wouldn't be fair on anyone, especially a child. The familiar nagging doubt crept to mind. These were just excuses. But she was afraid.

"Have you seen much of Tom?" Alice asked, trying her best to be nonchalant, but Tamara was wise to it.

"Not today, no. But he's around."

"Is he okay?"

Tamara sipped at her black coffee, thankful she'd asked for decaf because this was made stronger than she would've cared for.

"Yes, I'm sure he's fine."

Alice pursed her lips, frowning slightly. She spoke over the rim of her own cup, avoiding meeting Tamara's eye as she spoke. "Did you know he... isn't living here at the moment?"

Tamara nodded. Alice's frown deepened. She appeared hurt. It couldn't be easy. She chose not to mention it at all unless Alice continued on the subject. She didn't. Her eyes drifted to the floor alongside the television. A copy of the local paper was lying there. It was folded over and at an angle to her but Tamara could read much of the headline and the accompanying press photograph was of Tom standing outside this very house as he was about to get into his car. She indicated the paper.

"How are you handling all of that?"

Alice glanced at the paper and back to her. "The press? It was a nightmare until I stopped reading the papers, watching the news or... speaking to people."

She was angry. Keeping it in check, certainly, but angry, nonetheless.

"And your daughter?"

The anger left her, replaced by a visible cloak of sadness. "I took her into school yesterday. The first time since her father died. I wish I hadn't."

Tamara cocked her head. "Why?"

"Kids are cruel," Alice said quietly. "It's one thing to cope with losing her father, I suppose, but when people are pointing the finger at your mother, it must be unimaginable. I thought it would be good for her, be a distraction. I had no idea people would be like they were, children and parents alike. Even the teachers were different with me. I guess I was naïve."

"Were they standoffish?"

Alice shook her head. "Quite the opposite. The staff were so polite and friendly, over and above what they would be like normally. But I could see it in their faces. Much the same as how I felt the eyes of the other parents on me as I walked through the playground. I made it to the gates and then I must admit I ran to my car as fast as I dared."

Tamara felt a touch of guilt. Although Alice hadn't been arrested or referred to in any of the briefings she had given to the press as a suspect, word had spread amongst the small coastal community. It often did.

"And Saffy herself, how did she cope?"

"Like I said, kids are cruel," Alice said, lifting her mug to her lips. "She hasn't been sleeping well at all because of all this. I put her to bed a couple of hours early today. She was dead on her feet."

"I am sorry. That must be hard for you both."

"Oh, believe me it is. I've kept her home since and will do so until..." She looked directly at Tamara. "Until all this is over. Stuff the fines. Half the town think I killed my ex, so a few letters from the school aren't going to trigger me."

It was hard to know what to say. Tamara felt responsible, in part at least, but the investigation had to go where the evidence took them. The door from the hallway opened part way. Both of them looked, but no one appeared. Alice put her mug down.

"What is it, Baby?"

A little face peered around the door, scanning the room, all brown curls and rosy cheeks.

"I couldn't sleep," Saffy said. Alice held out her arms and the little girl entered, clambering up onto Alice's lap and smiling as she felt the comfort of her mother's arms wrap around her. Saffy eyed Tamara warily. For her part, Tamara smiled warmly.

"Hi, Saffy."

The girl's eyes remained fixed on her. Her expression blank and impassive. A blur of white, black and brown passed through her eye line as the terrier Tom kept from their most recent case navigated the tangle of legs around the coffee table, coming to stand before Tamara. He stared up at her expectantly. She smiled at the dog, which was all the encouragement he needed. He leapt up onto the sofa alongside her and, when no objections were made, he climbed onto her lap and curled up, resting his head on her chest, nose between her breasts, staring up at her, ears pricked and eyes wide. She stroked the top of his head. She thought he liked it. The dog didn't move, so that was positive. She smiled at him too.

"I heard voices," Saffy said in a monotone voice. "I thought it might be Tom."

Alice leaned down and swept the hair from in front of Saffy's eyes, kissing her forehead affectionately. "No. I'm sorry."

"Will he be home soon?"

Tamara watched Alice's chest inflate as she took in a deep breath, hugging the girl tighter, but she didn't answer the question.

"Come on. Let's get you back upstairs to bed."

Alice shuffled to the end of her seat, not wishing to put her daughter down. She stood up, with difficulty, which was unsurprising as an eight-year-old child, however slight, was heavy. Promising to be back once Saffy had settled, the two of them left the room.

Tamara sipped at her coffee, which was awkward with the dog attached to her but he seemed disinclined to move. Hearing movement upstairs, she glanced up at the ceiling, wondering how long Alice would be. Not that it mattered. She was really only here to get an insight of what she was like away from the pressures of an interview room. The other members of the team arguably knew her better, through Tom obviously, but as for herself, she'd actively avoided socialising with partners. It wasn't that she didn't like spending time with people, she did, but it was an environment she didn't feel comfortable in. When she was with Richard, she found it a breeze to do so. The two of them would never be joined at the hip, as most couples were

at social events. It was a regular occurrence for them to arrive at a function and not see each other again until they went home. Maybe that was what made them different to other couples. Maybe that's another reason for their split being a good thing.

But now she would socialise alone. Not easy when everyone else has a partner. And they were lovely, as far as she could tell. Becca was good for Eric. It seemed a good fit for him to be dating a primary-school teacher. She was steady, reliable, and kind. Much as he was. Cassie could usually be relied upon to arrive unattached, easing Tamara's sense of awkwardness, but even she appeared to be embarking on a new relationship, although she was being very coy with the details. Alice was good for Tom too, that was obvious. She was strong, confident and yet vulnerable at the same time. Tom needed to care for someone, to be a saviour of sorts. Such levels of empathy were what drove him, which was one reason why he made a decent detective. Alice and Tom Janssen. They were a good fit. It annoyed her, which was a ludicrous notion but one she couldn't avoid.

Were her emotions colouring her judgement? Is this why she was considering Alice both as a suspect and at the same time listening to her instincts that told her there was no way this woman could commit such a violent act? After all, she spent her life caring for others in her role at the hospital, and her spare time bringing up a daughter who seemed as secure and grounded a child as there could be. That was only achieved through parenting with love and kindness. But then Harold Shipman dedicated decades to healing the sick whilst killing others in the most cold and calculating manner. Alice wasn't like that. But this didn't mean she couldn't have killed Adrian Gage. And she was lying.

A car passed by outside. The dog lifted his head from her chest, looking towards the window. He climbed off her unceremoniously and onto the sofa and then the floor. He trotted into the kitchen, stopping at the French doors to the garden. She looked at him and he barked, turning to the door and shuffling his paws excitedly. Tamara got up and went over to the door. Fortunately the key was in the lock. The dog shifted his weight from one side to the other, scratching at the frame as she unlocked the door. She cracked it and he ran out into the garden.

Rather than sit down again, Tamara waited for the animal to do his thing and come back. Her eyes scanned the kitchen. It was far cleaner and tidier than her own. She told herself that was because she cooked from scratch



every night and when it came to vegan food, you had to be creative with a lot of ingredients to make the most of it, otherwise the dish could be bland and flavourless. That created a mess. At least it did when she made it.

There were a few bits of paper on the end of the breakfast bar. Opened letters. One was a utility statement alongside a school lunch menu by the look of it. Her eyes lingered on a blank envelope; she swore she recognised the handwriting. Sounds of the night carried through the open door and she quickly closed it, listening for movement upstairs. All was quiet. Picking up the envelope, she saw it was already open and addressed to Alice but only by her first name. This must have been hand delivered, left somewhere for her to find or given directly to her. She recognised the style of the letters A and the I in the name from the notes Gage made on the maps in his work backpack. Teasing open the envelope, she saw there was only one slip of folded paper inside. She removed it carefully, her eyes flitting towards the hall, half expecting Alice to appear and catch her at any moment.

It was the briefest of notes. It said *I am so much better at writing than talking... I will make it up to you and Sapphire. I only need one more chance. The future is ours.* It was signed *All my love, as always, A x.*

"He left that on my car last week," Alice said.

Tamara was startled. The shock passed quickly, shifting to embarrassment and shame having been rumbled snooping.

Alice was staring at her, arms crossed, a stance that only increased Tamara's growing discomfort.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

---

"I'M SO SORRY... I was just letting the dog out and," Tamara said, looking around, words escaping her. "I wasn't deliberately—"

"I found it when I finished my shift rotation of nights last week," Alice said, ignoring her bumbling justification. Tamara put the note down on the breakfast bar alongside the envelope. "Kinda creepy to find it tucked under the windscreen, to be honest." She folded her arms across her chest. "I've had my fair share of dysfunctional relationships in the past, obsessed exes and all of that, but at least I knew not to fear Ade. He could be an idiot." She smiled ruefully. "Believe me, a complete and total prat, but not a stalker."

"Why did he leave it?"

"Because I had told him that we weren't getting back together. I said it repeatedly."

"But he kept trying?" Alice nodded. "And you kept seeing him." It wasn't a question. They had the data from the mobile phone company and had put it to Alice in interview. She'd refused point blank to discuss it at the time.

"Ade was persistent," Alice said, running a hand through her hair. She looked exhausted. "He was used to getting his own way and seldom took no for an answer."

"Then why keep seeing him, going to his house?"

Alice exhaled, averting her eyes from Tamara's gaze and shaking her head. She leaned back against the door frame, casting her eyes to the ceiling. "Because... because I'm human. All I ever wanted was a normal life – whatever that is?"

Internally, Tamara thought, *don't we all*.

"I thought that's what I was getting with Ade," Alice said. "I thought we grew up, forged a career of some description, met someone and had kids. That was how life is supposed to go, right? I didn't get married thinking I'd ever be doing it again. When we had Sapphire, I thought that was it. Then, which came as a shock to me, a divorce loomed large on the horizon and in what felt like the blink of an eye I was a single parent. I'm struggling to work out exactly what I was supposed to be doing with zero clue as to where I would be in five or ten weeks, let alone years."

Tamara observed her calmly. She was speaking from the heart. "And now?"

Alice gathered herself, thinking about her response carefully. "Recently, Ade was all those things that drew me to him in the first place, caring, charming... focussed on me. On us. Despite everything we've been through, all the pain and the fighting... there was still that link between us. Do you know what it's like to give yourself over to another person with no expectation of taking it back?"

Tamara shook her head. "I was supposed to, but I realised it wasn't right for me. I caused a lot of pain in doing so as well."

"But if you were sure... and that person wanted you back, would you stay or would you go?"

Alice's eyes were gleaming now, watching Tamara closely. Did she expect reassurance, absolution?

"That would depend on the circumstances," she said finally.

Alice cocked her head. "Such as?"

"Well, if I'm putting myself in your place – there's Tom for starters."

Alice looked away, nodding.

"There's no one else here, Alice. I haven't read you your rights and this isn't being recorded. Were you and Adrian—"

"No," Alice said, meeting her eye. "As much as I was drawn to him, no. We weren't. I know what's right for me... and for Sapphire. Ade and I, as much as we were great together for a time, that time was in the past. I have a future... I had a future with someone else."

A scratching at the door made Tamara turn and let the dog back in. He bounded into the kitchen, giving his body a good shake before trotting past them and out into the hall.

"You're welcome," Tamara said to the dog.

"He'll be heading to Saffy's room, I expect," Alice said. She sounded despondent.

"Tom will come around," Tamara said. "Once all this is over, he'll come around."

Alice laughed, but it was a sound devoid of genuine humour. "My ex has been murdered and my current partner thinks I was either sleeping with him or that I murdered him. Or perhaps both. I might be waiting a while." She pushed off from the door frame, coming further into the kitchen and rubbing at her eyes with her hand. "I've made such a mess of things."

Tamara thought that was true, she'd handled the situation badly. But it was salvageable. Alice put her hands on the breakfast bar, steadying herself.

"Tom said he had to leave because his presence might distort the perception of the case. Is that true?"

Tamara nodded. "Yes. I think so. It was a wise move... from a professional point of view, but perhaps not from a personal one. I think I should fess up. I'm afraid it was me who put the idea in his head." She braced herself for a barrage of abuse, but it didn't come.

"Thank you for your honesty," Alice said, smiling weakly. She then went to speak but checked herself.

"No, please, go on."

"Tom speaks highly of you, you know. In fact, he talks about you all of the time. At least, that's how it feels sometimes."

Tamara looked down, fearing her face was flushing and not wanting Alice to see for fear she would see straight through her expression to the feelings she was still yet to admit to herself.

"I must admit to being quite jealous."

Tamara scoffed, trying to take a firm grip on the conversation. "Of me? Don't be."

"He cares for you. Tom, I mean. A lot," Alice said. Still, Tamara made sure not to meet her eye. "He cares about all of you, deeply."

"Tom cares about everyone," she said, summoning the courage to front this one out. "That's why everyone loves him so much."

"Do you?"

Alice's gaze was piercing. Tamara felt her chest constrict, completely thrown by the question. The doorbell sounded. Tamara was relieved.

"I'd better make a move," Tamara said.

Alice looked over her shoulder towards the front door. "I hope that's not the press again."

Tamara hastily excused herself, moving into the living room, and set about gathering her things. Alice came with her and the two of them walked to the front door together, reaching it just as the bell sounded again. Alice opened it to find Tom standing on the step. His eyes flicked between them, clearly surprised. He focussed on Tamara.

"What are you doing here?"

Tamara and Alice exchanged a glance. "Girl stuff," she said.

Tom's eyes narrowed and he looked at Alice, who smiled. "Like she said, girl stuff."

Tamara stepped past them both and onto the path beyond. She looked back at Alice. "Don't worry. Things will right themselves," she said, remembering their earlier words and added, "Everything is salvageable."

Alice appreciated the sentiment, smiling her gratitude. Tom looked even more confused.

Tamara reached out and gently tapped Tom's forearm. "I'll see you in the morning." She then set off for her car, parked in the street.

Tom turned to Alice. "Seriously, what did she want?"

Alice shrugged. "I'm not sure to be honest. But it was good to talk. I think it's time you and I did, too, don't you?"

"I got your message," he said. "I should have called but..."

"Come in," she said. The longer we stand out here, the more the neighbours will be gossiping."

She stepped back, beckoning him inside.

Tamara watched the end of the exchange from the car, feeling a heavy heart when they disappeared from view and the door closed. Her mobile rang and she answered it without looking at the screen.

"Tamara, where have you been? I've been trying to get a hold of you all evening!"

"Yeah, sorry. I see you've left a message—"

"Three messages," Cassie countered.

"Three. Yes, so I see. What's up?"

"We've had forensic analysis back on the fibres found underneath Adrian Gage's fingernails."

"And?" Tamara sensed the magnitude of the results due to the tone of Cassie's voice. "What is it, Cass?"

"They've matched the fibres to a jumper recovered from the search warrant... executed on Alice Gage's house." Cassie waited patiently for a response. Moments passed. "What do you want to do?"

Tamara looked back at the house, running her tongue across the outside of her lower lip.

"Tamara?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm still here."

"What do you want to do?"

---

TOM CLOSED the door behind them. Russell appeared at the top of the stairs and barked excitedly before charging down them and almost losing his footing on the way. He leapt up at Tom repeatedly. Tom dropped to his haunches, patting him, and ran a hand over his head. The dog kept leaping up, growling playfully. Saffy's voice carried from her room, calling for her mum.

"For heaven's sake, take him into the kitchen," Alice said, hurrying to the stairs. "I don't want Saffy coming down to find you here."

He looked up at her, his joy at the dog's welcome dissipating at what she just said. Alice smiled, lowering her voice.

"I didn't mean it like that. It's just that she misses you and I don't want her to wake up in the morning and find you're not here again." Alice's manner shifted from stern to nervous in the blink of an eye. "And you won't be here in the morning, will you?"

Tom exhaled slowly, shaking his head. "No."

Alice looked away from him and made her way upstairs. "I'll just check on her."

Tom thought he heard her voice crack, but he wasn't sure. He encouraged the dog, who was still nipping at the foot of his trouser legs, into the kitchen.

"Do you want to go out?" Tom asked, walking to the French doors, but Russell sat down where he was, his tongue out, lolling to one side. "Guess not," Tom said. He caught sight of the open letter from Adrian that Tamara had put down on the breakfast bar. He scanned it, not paying much attention to the words written on the page. It was the paper itself that had caught his

eye. Momentarily confused, he then took out his mobile and snapped a couple of shots before hurriedly stepping away from the breakfast bar upon hearing Alice descending the stairs.

He couldn't quite believe what he'd just seen. And he didn't know what to do about it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

---

ALICE ENTERED THE KITCHEN.

"She wasn't really awake. I got to her in time—" Her face dropped when she saw Tom's expression. "What is it?"

He looked at her, his brow furrowing as he glanced at the note on the breakfast bar. Her eyes followed his and her mouth fell open. She stepped forward, reaching for him. Tom shook his head and took a step back from her.

"It's really not what you think," she said.

"No, no," I'm sure it isn't."

"I can explain."

Tom held up both hands. "No, really. It's okay... I just have to go and check something out."

"But you've only just got here."

"I know," he said, moving past her. "It can't wait."

He brushed against her as he passed and she took a hold of his forearm, forcing him to meet her eye but he immediately looked away.

"It's *not* what you think, Tom. Adrian and me... we were over a long time ago." She angled her head so that she came into his eye line. "He still hadn't come to terms with it, that's all."

Tom turned to face her and she released her grip on his arm.

"And you? Had you come to terms with it?"

"Yes. For a moment I wasn't sure. Ade... has a way of pushing my buttons. He always did. But I *never* cheated on you, Tom. I wouldn't do that. Please don't leave. Not yet."



"I have to." She broke away from his gaze, looking to her hands clasped in front of her. "But not because of what's written in that note," he said, indicating the paper with a flick of his head. She looked at it, biting her bottom lip. "When did he leave that for you? Was it recently?"

Alice looked confused. "What difference does it make?"

"It matters, yes."

She thought about it. "Last week. Maybe Tuesday or Wednesday. Why?"

"Look after it. I might need it."

Now she was dumbfounded. "Whatever for?"

"Trust me," he said, tapping his index and forefinger against the breakfast bar. "I need to go. It's important and I can't leave it until the morning."

He leaned in to kiss her, Alice angling her head to meet his, and they kissed. It was brief but affectionate.

"We still need to talk this through," she said.

He nodded. "Yes, we do. And I intend to make sure we get the time."

With that said, he strode from the kitchen without another word. The dog followed, and when he reached the front door, he tried to step out with Tom which was a welcome change. Tom dropped to his haunches, ruffling the terrier's head but making sure he understood he was to stay here.

"I'll be back soon, little man."

Tom hurried to his car, his mind a whirlwind of thoughts. Not for Alice and his doubts about their relationship, but because of the note Adrian Gage had left for her. He'd found a link, one that everybody had missed and he was determined to flesh it out before he shared it with anyone else. Driving to the station, he found his confidence building. Maybe now he was going to be able to make some sense of all this. Somehow. He thought of Eric. How he could use the constable's ability to sift through information right now, but he decided against calling him in. Everyone deserved a bit of personal time, and this wasn't an emergency.

Much of the station was in darkness with few people around. Those on nights were either out and about or manning the custody suite, but it was quieter than usual. Flicking on the lights in the ops room, Tom pulled out a chair and switched a computer on. He typed Prometheus Energy into the search bar and hit return. The page filled with numerous articles detailing the proposed Norfolk Wash project. Liam Hansell's picture appeared in the

image search, standing in an orange high-viz jacket and a hard hat, presumably out at sea on a maintenance vessel. There were pages of hits listed and Tom felt the weight of a night's work sorting through them was going to be likely. He sensed he was on the same path that Adrian Gage must have trodden, but he was still unsure as to why.

The note Gage left for Alice. Torn from a small pad with a blue bar across the top, only this one was complete, including the company logo. Prometheus Energy. He was annoyed with himself. Having left the offices of the company, he'd spied the name plate on the wall, blue background and white lettering, but still hadn't made the connection. Adrian Gage had left a clue for him with his sister, a piece of paper that told him where Gage had been. And he'd missed it. Until now.

Reaching the third page of results, he was finding links to the same articles only printed in different newspapers and online magazines. Sitting back, he put his hands behind his head, interlocking his fingers. Why would Adrian Gage be at the offices of Prometheus Energy? If he could figure that out, then he would more than likely be able to narrow down the search criteria for what he was trying to find. Gage had a proven track record of exposing corruption, of forcing dodgy backroom deals out into the open. If this was the case here, then the company must have something to hide.

Returning to the search bar, he typed in the word 'controversy' after the company name and hit return. The screen shifted and the results changed. The first three entries were related to the activism. A shot of Mary Beckett was there alongside the second article. There didn't seem like much to the protesters that would be of interest to a journalist such as Gage. Objections to planning proposals of this nature were common and hardly likely to be the big 'final score' he'd described to his sister. It was the fourth result that stood out to him, though. Opening it up, he read through the article and the further he read down the more it ticked the boxes. He zeroed in on that story, searching for it as a search term of its own. There was no shortage of articles and he found several contradicting one another. This was it. It had to be.

Buoyed by the find, he took a note of the name and typed it into the police national computer. The results returned a local address in King's Lynn, on the western edge of the county. Glancing at the clock, he figured at this time of the night he could be there within half an hour. It would be late to drop by unannounced, but upsetting people came with the warrant

card. He made a note of the address before switching off his monitor and pulling his jacket off the back of his chair. He left ops with such haste he didn't think to turn the lights off, quickening his pace along the corridor.

---

LIGHTS WERE ON, on the ground floor of the house when Tom pulled up outside. He wasn't familiar with the area he found himself in. The estate was probably built in the sixties, terraces of half a dozen houses, uniform in both size and appearance for the most part. They were most likely all once council owned, but many had been bought or sold off with the odd house in each run having been adapted. Whereas many had white boarding clad on the front elevation, some had been changed to more contemporary colours to match the new windows and doors. Each house had a small garden to the front, bounded by a fence or a low wall with varying degrees of attention paid to the upkeep. The residents' parking was all on the street however, with no driveways for any of the houses. Some had knocked down the fence and driven their vehicles over the grass from the road, thirty yards away, so they could park in front of their homes.

Tom locked the car and made his way to the end terrace house in front of him. Reaching the door, he could hear the television on inside. Checking the time, it was nearly ten o'clock. He pressed the doorbell, hearing it chime inside, and waited. A group of teenagers cycled by on the path, one of them pulling a wheelie, encouraged by his friends. The door opened and a woman peered out at him. She was blonde, her hair tied back and away from her face. She eyed him warily.

"Mrs Tilson?"

She nodded. Tom reached into his pocket for his ID.

"I'd like to have a word with you about your husband—"

"I've told you before, I've got nothing to say."

She made to close the door and Tom hurriedly tried to prevent her doing so, but she was too quick and he found it slammed in his face. The light was on in the hall and he could see her shadow. She hadn't gone anywhere. He pressed the bell again. After a few seconds, he saw the shadow move and the door was yanked open. This time she scowled at him.

"Look! I've told you people I have nothing to say—"

Tom raised his warrant card, cutting her off.

"I think we're at cross purposes, Mrs Tilson. Detective Inspector Janssen, Norfolk Police. I'd like a word."

Tom followed her into the house, walking straight into the living room. A teenage boy was lying on the sofa. Tom guessed he was sixteen, maybe a little older. The boy's mother picked up the remote and switched the television off, much to her son's irritation.

"Give us a minute, would you, Ollie?" she said. It wasn't a request. The boy hoisted his legs off the sofa and eyed Tom suspiciously. "He just wants to talk to me."

The boy edged past Tom, who turned side on to give the boy room. He left without another word.

"And close the door behind you please."

He did so and then she looked at Tom, her arms folded defensively across her chest.

"You said this was about my husband? What do you want to know?"

He took her measure. Despite the apparent attitude, she wasn't quite as self-assured as she was trying to make out.

"Your husband was William Tilson," Tom asked.

"Billy, yes."

"And he used to work for Prometheus Energy, is that right?"

"For a subcontractor, contracted by them, yes. I'm sure you didn't need to knock on my door at this time of the night to find that out."

Tom ignored her hostility. He wasn't sure where it was coming from.

"Your husband passed away in an accident, on site."

The stare she had fixed on him softened slightly, replaced by a nervous expression. He'd seen so many people do that in the past, usually during an interview. The confidence wavering as details were extracted but he hadn't asked her anything particularly searching, but now he wanted to.

"So? What of it? It was two years ago and we're trying to move on. Why are you people dragging it all up again?"

He found that a telling comment.

"I read a piece in the regional paper where you made numerous allegations about safety practices on the site, claiming your late husband deemed it unsafe to work at."

"I was angry, upset," she said, avoiding his gaze. "I'd just lost my husband. My son his father, and I was lashing out. Billy was the earner in

our house. I've been on the sick for the past couple of years. Depression and anxiety. Billy's death knocked me for six. Understandable."

"True," Tom said, smiling politely and trying to put her at ease a little. "The thing is, you made that claim to several newspapers and the Health and Safety Executive only to offer alternative testimony when called to give evidence before the coroner. Why was that?"

She shook her head, still avoiding eye contact. "I remembered differently, that's all. Once I'd got over the grief and that."

Tom looked around the room. The television was massive, with a screen equal to or more than sixty-five inches. It was easily twice the size it should be for a room of this size and shape. The sofas looked new, as were the windows and doors. He looked beyond her into the kitchen, seeing a modern handle-less theme to the cabinets.

"And how's your health now? Any better?"

She shrugged. "Up and down, you know. It is what it is. What's this all about anyway?"

"I'm investigating another case," Tom said, crossing towards her and taking out his mobile. He began scrolling through the gallery feature, opening up a photograph he'd sent to his phone before he left the station. "You said someone else had been here asking questions."

She remained tight-lipped, but her expression changed again. She was scared. It was obvious. Tom held the screen up to her face so she could see the image.

"Was it this man by any chance?"

Her eyes flickered with recognition but she didn't reply, staring at the image of a smiling Adrian Gage that Tom had downloaded, taken at an awards dinner three years previously.

"Mrs Tilson, was this him?"

She looked over the screen, directly into his eyes, nodding almost imperceptibly.

"And what did he want from you?"

"I can't remember."

She was lying.

"You should know this man, Adrian Gage, has been murdered," Tom said flatly. She gasped. He took a step closer, keeping the phone where it was. Her eyes drifted to it once more. "And I need to know what he wanted from you. And I'm not leaving here until I get it."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

---

TAMARA GREAVE ENTERED OPS. Tom glanced up from his desk and then rose, hurriedly coming to meet her. Her eyes narrowed as he came before her.

"Are you okay?" she asked. He nodded, momentarily confused as to why she would ask. He was feeling the most positive he'd been in days. With that said, he hadn't slept much overnight. The excitement that came from having spoken to Billy Tilson's wife ensured sleep wasn't forthcoming. It was all he could do to restrain himself from pulling the team in early. The thought saw him glance at Eric. He'd called one of them in early, knowing that he would be up and about in any event, seeing as it was a school day.

"What's with the enthusiasm?" Tamara asked.

Tom took her by the elbow and guided her to a freshly cleared white board. Both he and Eric had come at both murders afresh and he was convinced they were making headway. Tamara cast her eye over what was already there but Tom would be the first to admit there were still plenty of gaps to fill.

"I really think both these murders are linked and up until now we've just not seen the connection," he said, hearing the anticipation in his own voice.

She looked at him, her eyebrows knitting. "And the connection is?"

"Prometheus Energy."

Tamara perched herself on the edge of a desk, slipping off her coat and tossing it across the nearest chair. Returning her gaze to the board, she nodded in Tom's direction. "All right. Go on, I'm listening."

"It's no secret that Mary Beckett was a thorn in the side of the company, after all, she's been very vocal about the company's plans regarding the

Norfolk Wash project. Liam Hansell had been out to see Mary at her home trying to convince her about the environmental positives surrounding the project."

"Right," Tamara said, cupping her chin with thumb and forefinger. "But she wasn't opposed to the wind farm itself."

He shook his head. "No, just the proposed site where the connection made landfall."

"Is that a reason to kill? I mean, there are secondary sites as I understand it."

"Yes, yes, of course," Tom said, gesturing for Eric to come in. The detective constable slid his chair closer to them, leaning his elbows on his knees, a notepad clutched in one hand. "Eric."

"From what I've been able to find out, Prometheus Energy is in trouble. They've over-extended themselves with their expansion plans in recent years. They aren't large enough to operate the design and construction projects they do alone, few companies are. Therefore, it's common in the industry to diversify the portfolio and share the load when it comes to costs. What companies like Prometheus tend to do, is obtain the development licences and, once they have the go-ahead, they source other entities to form a JV."

"JV?" Tamara asked.

"Sorry, a joint venture," Eric said. "This results in a massive injection of resources in the form of expertise but more importantly, money."

Tom picked up the narrative. "We spoke to Hansell and he was bullish about the project. He said contracts were prepared and ready to be signed, no doubt once the project was rubber stamped."

"I've done a bit of digging around and as I understand it," Eric continued, "Prometheus has several companies interested in the JV, one based in The Netherlands and also one of the largest players in the sector which is co-owned and financed by the Norwegian state. But all of that is hanging on the ruling of the planning inspectorate due this week."

Tamara frowned. "But surely, even if the switching station is ruled out, they'll simply move on to one of the backup locations. Right?"

Eric smiled. "Yes... but I don't think Prometheus can afford that. Even if the resubmission is fast-tracked, you're still looking at a significant delay. Not to mention the additional lead times if those plans are also opposed."

And I dare say they will be. The opposition groups will be buoyed by their success and, if there's any doubt in the revised scheme, they'll go at it."

"Why the hurry?" she asked.

"Because this is the third project in a row beset with problems," Eric said, looking to his notepad and flicking back a couple of pages. "Two years ago they opened a new hydro-power station in Norway. The hydro schemes over there are a massive part of their power generation fleet. It was the largest project Prometheus have been involved in to date, but a tunnel collapse within days of the official opening saw it taken offline for the following year. They couldn't meet their contractual obligations to provide power to the grid. It proved *very* costly. Besides that, they've been in litigation ever since with the construction firm subcontracted for the build. The latter cited design flaws as the cause of the collapse and denied liability. Until the courts rule, Prometheus has had to source the funds to recommission the station and employ new contractors. It's tens of millions in costs before interest payments are applied on the loans. The company statement accompanying the latest accounts document these loans as temporary. It looks to me as if they sought bridging finance ahead of longer-term loans and these payments are coming due."

"Presuming the Norfolk Wash project is the third project you're talking about, what about the second?" Tamara asked. Tom could see she was intrigued with the direction they were taking. He stepped over and pointed to the top right corner of the board, tapping a picture with his forefinger.

"This wind farm off the north coast of Holland, situated offshore near Haarlem," he said. "A number of companies in the industry are based in the city, and Prometheus Energy has close ties with several. There was a work-related death involving a maintenance contractor two years ago. A number of allegations were made that safety measures were being circumvented in exchange for speeding up the works. They were behind schedule and everyone was pushing hard. A whistle-blower came forward, along with the dead man's next of kin, claiming to have evidence of the breach in health and safety rules. Despite the investigation resulting in a large fine, the corporate liability charges collapsed."

"Why was that?" Tamara asked, resting her hands on the edge of the desk beside her.

"The evidence never materialised," Tom said. "The whistle-blower retracted what they alleged, offering no supporting evidence, and the family



of the deceased fell quiet."

"And this helps your theory because?" "Because I've spoken to the deceased man's wife last night," Tom said. Tamara fixed him with a stare. "She's local. Reluctant to talk about it."

"And you think—"

"She's withholding because someone's got to her," he said. "Not threatening, but they've bought her silence."

Tamara shook her head. "Tom, that's a serious accusation to level without proof."

He held up his hand. "I know, at this point it's a reach, but the woman has no income, no job. Eric checked her records with HMRC." He indicated Eric.

"She hasn't shown up on the PAYE system for years, indicating she hasn't had any formal paid employment in that time."

"But she has no shortage of funds," Tom said. "Now she didn't claim to have had a life insurance policy to me, and I'm willing to bet that she's either receiving repeated sums of money from someone or was given a large pay out off the books to ensure her silence. To be fair to her," Tom said, biting his lower lip, "her other half was the earner in the household and she was left widowed with a child. I wouldn't blame her."

He looked at Tamara as she studied the information. She was intrigued, but he wasn't sure if she was fully convinced just yet.

"Okay, let's see if you can pull me across the line," she said. "Where's the link to Beckett?"

"Ah... we don't have one," Tom said. She looked at him. "Yet!" he added. "But Billy Tilson's widow had another visitor recently. Adrian Gage, and he was asking the same questions."

Tamara glared at him. He knew what she was thinking but wouldn't say so in front of Eric. He'd promised to stay away from the Gage case, and he'd tried to an extent.

"It's the type of story he would go after; corruption, bribery. This has all the hallmarks. Why else would he be calling on Tilson's widow?"

"Eric," she said without looking at him. "Can you give us a minute?"

Eric looked between them, raising his eyebrows as he read Tamara's expression. "I'll... get some coffees."

Tamara waited until Eric had stepped out of the room and then she turned on him.

"I'm sure you'll have a good reason as to how you've found a link to a murder case you're not supposed to be anywhere near! I thought we'd had this conversation and you understood—"

"It's not like I went looking for it," he said. He could understand her reaction, but he bristled at it all the same. What was he supposed to do when a tentative link came to mind? "I wasn't investigating Adrian's murder. Hear me out before you go off on one, will you?"

"Then explain to me how a link to the Gage case came up when trying to locate Mary Beckett's killer."

"The pad!"

Tamara frowned, her lips parting. "What pad?"

"Adrian Gage left a note with his sister to pass on to me if anything happened to him. It was written on the same paper as a note he left for Alice last week. It was Prometheus Energy stationery, headed paper."

Tamara raised a hand, indicating for him to stop. "Back up. Gage left you a note with his sister, saying what?"

"Just to pass the paper to me. Nothing more."

"And why am I only hearing about this now?" she said, scowling at him.

He was thrown by her attitude, feeling his anger rising. His response was curtailed by Cassie entering in the background. Tom looked at her but Tamara only had eyes for him. Cassie picked up on the tension in the room, hanging her coat up slowly. Tom flicked his hand in her direction and Tamara looked over her shoulder.

Cassie tentatively approached. "I would say good morning, but I fear I've missed something."

Tom's eyes narrowed. "What did you do with the note I gave you from Carol Martins, Adrian Gage's sister?"

Cassie's mouth fell open. "I... it's on my desk," she said, confused.

"You didn't tell me," Tamara said.

"I haven't seen you," Cassie countered. "Why? What's going on?"

Tom turned back to Tamara. "That's the link, right there. He was looking into Prometheus Energy, the cover up, the deal they were working on. Maybe he had something. He told his sister it was something big. He must have been close."

Tamara took a deep breath, chewing on her bottom lip. She put both hands up, palms facing Tom, and fixed him with a stare.

"Okay, let's run this through. Just saying, for the sake of argument, that you're right. If Gage had something on Hansell or the company, he killed him... for what? To keep the secret?"

Tom shook his head. "We don't know who. It might not have been anyone at Prometheus Energy. It need only be someone with something to lose if the company goes to the wall. Which brings us to most of those who we've been looking at for the Beckett murder. Those with a vested interest."

Tamara thought hard, her expression fixed. "Run them by me."

"Well, you've mentioned Prometheus Energy. Locally, they have a minimal presence, but Liam Hansell is the one who visited Mary Beckett and is based in Norfolk much of the time. Although, he was..."

"What is it?" Tamara asked.

Tom grimaced, shaking his head. There was a nagging thought at the back of his mind, but he was struggling to tease it to the front. It was significant, he was sure. Eric re-entered the room, seemingly relieved to see Cassie was present, and picked up his pace. He didn't have any coffee in his hand. Tom beckoned him over.

"Eric, remember when we spoke to Daniel Crowe?" Eric nodded. "His wife walked us out bemoaning her husband's concerns regarding the wind farm proposal for the switching station. She said he was frustrated at the weekend. Do you recall?"

Eric thought hard. "Yes, but..." he shook his head, "I can't remember her saying anything particularly useful. Why?"

Tom was about to reply, but Cassie interrupted at that point, flicking her eyes anxiously between Tom and Tamara. "Look, clearly I've missed a fair bit of this but." She glanced at Tom again. "We still have concrete forensics that put... Alice at the murder scene."

Tom folded his arms across his chest. Cassie had been pushing the case against Alice pretty much since the body was discovered as far as he could tell. She was nervous about speaking in front of him, but he maintained his composure. He was confident they were now on the right track.

"What evidence?" he asked calmly.

"The lab matched the fibres of Alice's jumper to the ones found under Gage's fingernails," she said, shooting a sideways glance in his direction but focussing on Tamara.

"And what else?" he asked. "Did they find any trace evidence related to the stabbing, blood spatter, DNA?"

Cassie shook her head.

"So, all you have is that she was there at his house," Tom said, failing to keep the dismissive tone from his voice. "We know that. She admitted it. But there's nothing to link her to the act itself, just supposition."

Cassie rolled her eyes. "Your objectivity is compromised by your emotional attachment to Alice. It's obvious—"

"And you're too narrow in your outlook. The easiest answer isn't always the right one, Cass!"

Cassie scoffed. Tom made ready to respond but Tamara stepped between them.

"Pack it in, the pair of you," she said. "Tom's right. We've got the time frame and evidence Alice was there. That's not in dispute. But," she said, looking at Tom, "Alice hasn't helped herself by not revealing why she was there."

"Isn't it obvious?" he said. "The two of you work with me. Adrian was making a play to win her back over the course of a few weeks, maybe months," he said, his voice lowering as he spoke. Cassie and Eric averted their eyes from his, feeling his embarrassment. "If she opened up to you then there was every chance I would hear about it... and she'd made her choice. And she chose me."

"You're sure about that?" Tamara asked. He met her eye, wondering if something had been said between the two women the night he'd met Tamara leaving Alice's place after an impromptu meeting. His gaze narrowed, but Tamara's expression remained fixed.

"Yes, I am. That's what she told me... and I trust her."

Tamara held his gaze for a moment. Was she assessing his judgement, like Cassie, questioning whether he could be objective? Then she nodded and broke the eye contact.

"If you're right, then that would explain her reluctance to reveal the detail. Particularly if she couldn't foresee ever being responsible for Adrian's death. And if she'd called it off with him—" She shot him an apologetic look. He waved it away.

"We just need to get to the truth. I'll handle the fallout later," he said.

"Okay," Tamara said, "if she'd ended it all with Adrian Gage, she had no reason to kill him. If a lover kills their partner, it's usually the one who is scorned who loses it, not the one choosing to walk away. That's one reason

I've struggled with seeing Alice as a suspect." She looked at Cassie, shaking her head. "What would she have to gain from killing him?"

Cassie reluctantly accepted the logic.

"Right," Tamara said, looking at Tom, "you've got us this far. What do you want to do next?"

"Bring in Liam Hansell. Put him in an interview room and throw some facts at him, see how he responds."

Tamara looked at the board one more time, rolling her tongue across the inside of her cheek. "Do it."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

---

TOM JANSSEN WALKED along the corridor clutching his notes, arranging his thoughts as he made his way to the interview room. This time, more than in any other case he had worked previously, his performance counted. On this occasion he was well invested in the results, more so than just to catch a killer. If his theory proved to be correct, then not only would they have revealed a murderer but the shadow of suspicion would leave Alice for good. Tamara gave him the option to sit it out, to leave it to her but he declined. She was capable and tenacious, of that he was in no doubt, but he wanted to see this one through. Not least because it was his theory, but that's all it was, a theory. There was little concrete evidence they could produce to support it. Never had he felt such pressure.

Eric appeared at the end of the corridor, running to catch up with him. Tom was hopeful he'd already found something useful to put to Liam Hansell. He turned to the constable expectantly.

"I've just got off the phone with an old friend of my dad's," Eric said. "I've not seen him in years, but he knocks around in the same circles as Daniel Crowe."

"Anything interesting?"

"The word around the golf club is that Crowe isn't quite what he used to be. From what his wife said to us, I reckon she's in the dark, but the rumour mill has him in trouble financially."

Tom knitted his eyebrows. "I thought Crowe was semi-retired. He looks like he's doing all right."

"Yeah, outwardly, that's exactly the impression he gives off but not so. At least, not according to my source. Crowe built quite a large land

portfolio over the years, primarily agricultural blocking, but as his interest in farming waned, he starts banking plots for future development. Apparently, he's very much one of those bores at the nineteenth hole at the club banging on about how well he's doing. Seemingly he's been a little subdued of late."

Tom considered the information and what effect it might have, if any, on the conversation he was lining up for Hansell.

"Any idea how serious his position is?"

Eric inclined his head. "He has a number of development sites that ran aground in the financial crisis a few years ago. He had to offload some land that went for a bit of a song by all accounts just to get by. Seemingly, this time last year he entered into negotiations with an American agri firm with a view to selling off that side of his business and it all looked good until this past spring. The deal fell apart. My source tells me Crowe thought it a done deal and was already moving on with his development plans. He's overstretched himself."

"So, he might need this planning decision to go his way."

Eric nodded. "I'd say so."

"Okay, good work, Eric," Tom said, reaching for the door handle.

"There's something else." Tom glanced at him. Eric hesitated. "Rumours are going around that Daniel Crowe is seeing someone. No idea who," he said, shaking his head. "I don't know if it's relevant, but thought I'd mention it."

Tom smiled and opened the door to the interview room. Liam Hansell sat behind a table, an empty chair alongside him. Cassie was already in position, hands clasped together in front of her, waiting patiently. Tom glanced up at the camera in the corner of the room where two walls met the ceiling, the telltale red light indicating it was recording. Tamara was watching from another room.

Liam Hansell's eyes followed Tom as he approached, pulling out a chair and sitting down, casually clearing his throat and gesturing for Cassie to set the recorder running to commence the interview. She announced those present, and Tom confirmed his name for the benefit of the tape. Tom read Hansell his rights, knowing full well he'd already declined the offer of legal representation. He was either supremely confident, naïve or, Tom hoped the last was wrong, completely innocent.

"Mr Hansell. Thank you for coming in this morning."

"I wasn't aware it was optional."

Tom smiled but didn't reply. "Well, we'll try and get through the questions as quickly as possible and then you can be on your way."

"Great. Ask away. But as I told you before, I don't see how I can help with the Mary Beckett case. I'm surprised I'm here."

Tom opened the folder in his hands and withdrew a small plastic wallet. Inside was the note Adrian Gage had left for Alice. He placed it on the table in front of Hansell, whose eyes flicked to it and away again.

"Do you recognise this?" Tom asked.

Hansell nodded, pursing his lips. "It's a piece of paper?"

"Headed paper with your company logo on it. Part of a notepad, we believe?"

"Yes, it is."

"Are there a lot of them around?"

Hansell looked momentarily puzzled at such a random line of enquiry. Tom persisted.

"Mr Hansell? Do you have a lot of company stationery in circulation?"

Hansell blew out his cheeks, raising his eyebrows and shaking his head. "I'd say no, not really. We use headed paper, like other businesses, and have this stuff lying around the offices. We do a bit of this type of thing... pads, branded disposable pens... lanyards and keyrings, and so on. If we ever have school trips, we'll hand out some freebies, not that we've done anything like that in a long time."

"How long?"

"Er... probably a year ago... but not around here. That sort of follows once a project ramps up to build community buy-in to the scheme, you know. Everyone likes free stuff, right?"

Tom nodded solemnly. Internally, he was pleased. Hansell had just killed off a plausible explanation for Gage having one of these pads in his possession without realising it. Now there seemed only one way he could have obtained such a pad, and that was by being present in Hansell's premises. Cassie, sitting alongside Tom, stared at Hansell, her expression firm. Hansell glanced at her several times, smiling nervously, but Cassie remained unmoved.

"Is this why I'm here? Because of stationery?"

"Partly," Tom said. The expression on the face of the man opposite him changed from puzzled to concerned. He must be trying to work out where



Tom was going with this line of questioning.

"What on earth does a... company-branded notepad," he said, waving his hands around in front of him, "have to do with Mary Beckett's death?"

"Oh, we're talking at cross purposes," Tom said. "I'm asking because I want to understand how one of these pads ended up in the possession of Adrian Gage."

Hansell's lips parted, his eyes narrowing.

"Because," Tom said, sitting forward and tapping the evidence bag for added emphasis, "by your own admission he must have been to your offices fairly recently. Do you know Adrian Gage, Mr Hansell?"

Hansell fixed him with a stare. His lips must have run dry because he felt the need to roll them inside his mouth, his face a picture of concentration. He slowly shook his head, his eyes narrowing.

"I recognise the name from the news. He was the local man who died, wasn't he?"

"Yes, that's right. He was a journalist, investigating—"

"That's it!" Hansell said, sitting upright and snapping his fingers. "Journalist. Now I remember. Yes, he came to the office once to ask about our development plans. I didn't recall his name but now you mention it, yes, I remember. Gage, you say?"

Tom nodded. Perhaps Liam Hansell was sharper than he'd thought. Had he continued to deny ever meeting Gage, he would only draw more scrutiny upon himself. By offering a plausible reason as to how they may have met, he was putting a hole in the case against him. It was similar to a man accused of a sexual assault claiming to have been in a sexual relationship with his victim in order to explain away his DNA being present at the victim's home or on their person. To maintain a stance of complete denial would be crippling for a defence, but to offer a credible solution could do quite the opposite, and sow doubt in a juror's mind.

"Adrian Gage specialised in uncovering shady dealings, corruption and the like," Tom said. "Why might he be interested in you?"

Hansell shrugged, looking away from Tom's gaze and picking at an invisible speck of something on the table in front of him and casting it aside.

"And when did this visit take place?" Cassie asked, pen poised to make a note of the answer. Hansell lifted his gaze to meet hers.

"Months ago. I'm sorry. It was a brief visit. Maybe you should check his appointment diary."

"So you didn't visit him on Monday last?" Tom asked.

Hansell sighed. "No, I didn't. And, like I'm pretty sure I told you before, I was in Copenhagen at the weekend."

Tom nodded, making an 'ahh' sound whilst flicking through his notes. "Copenhagen, yes, I remember. Remind me, you live there?"

"That's my base, yes. My husband's office is there and I travel a lot with my work so it makes sense to have our base there."

"That's right, you said before."

Tom rolled his lips, staring straight ahead. Hansell displayed visible discomfort in the following period of silence.

"Is there anything else, Inspector? Honestly, I am happy to help, but I feel we're wasting each other's time."

"There is one more thing, Mr Hansell."

Hansell sank back in his seat, folding his arms across his chest. ""What is it?"

"If you were in Copenhagen until your return... which was?" Tom asked, holding an open palm up to encourage an answer.

"Late Monday."

"Late Monday," Tom repeated. "How did you have a meeting with Daniel Crowe at his house on the weekend?"

Hansell's mouth opened, but no words came out. He stared at Tom, then glanced at Cassie, who was also watching him intensely.

"You see, we spoke to Mr Crowe on an unrelated matter during our investigation and his wife, Elizabeth, described the two of you as being rather animated with regard to the forthcoming planning decision. We didn't realise at the time but the two of you have a great deal riding on this approval."

"I... I..." he said, stammering in search of an answer. "It's a mistake," he whispered.

"Another description would be that it's a lie, Mr Hansell. Because you couldn't be in two places at the same time, could you, Mr Hansell?"

Liam Hansell bit his bottom lip, sitting forward and resting his elbows on the table and bringing his palms to his face, covering mouth and nose.

"And on the day we first met, you seemed rather agitated when DC Collet and I sat down with you. A state that changed when we began to talk

about Mary Beckett." Tom said. "You thought we were there about Adrian Gage. The relief must have been incredible for you when we asked about Mary Beckett instead. Do you recall?"

Hansell looked at him and nodded almost imperceptibly.

"I put it to you, Mr Hansell," Tom said, "that you were not in Denmark on Monday afternoon but, rather, you were at Adrian Gage's house in Cley. An altercation ensued, resulting in Mr Gage being mortally wounded, and you were responsible for that." Hansell looked down at the table in front of him. Tom could see him beginning to shake in an involuntary manner. "How am I doing so far?"

Hansell shook his head again, still staring at the table. "It wasn't like that... that's not what happened."

"You should be aware that we have sourced a search warrant for your home address here in Norfolk as well as for your offices, and the border force will be able to confirm exactly when you left the country and, more importantly, when you returned. That means we will be looking at your appointment schedule, telephone records, each and every payment made from your personal and business bank accounts," Tom said flatly, "and our Danish counterparts have agreed to do the same at their end. Now, I'm betting we will find a trail of payments to Billy Tilson's widow and when we do—"

"Enough!" Hansell barked, slamming the flats of his hands to the table. Cassie and Tom exchanged a look. "Enough," he repeated, only quieter and more measured. He lifted his eyes to meet Tom's. They gleamed with moisture. He looked crestfallen. "Please... just stop."

"Tell us what did happen."

## CHAPTER THIRTY

---

HANSELL LIFTED HIMSELF UPRIGHT, the palms of his hands coming together with his fingertips beneath his chin as he looked to the ceiling.

"I went to his place—"

"Adrian Gage's house?" Tom said, clarifying it for the recording.

"Yes, to his house. He was intending to run a story," Hansell said, lowering his gaze to Tom. "It was a multi-angle investigation and he'd come to me for comment." He sighed. "Offering me a *right of reply*, isn't that what they call it?" Tom nodded. Hansell sighed. "Initially, I wasn't concerned. After all, he was only going over the same ground as countless other journalists had already done before. But then..."

"Gage found Billy Tilson's family, didn't he?"

Hansell silently agreed with a flick of the head, closing his eyes. "Yes. He knew. Don't ask me how," he said, shaking his head and smiling in despair. "But he knew. He was going to run the story this week, ahead of the inspectorate's decision. He figured it would garner the maximum amount of coverage." He sat forward, fixing Tom with a stare. "I went to his place to ask him not to. I *begged* him not to run it this week. Even if he only shelved it for another week or so until the contracts were signed. That way, I could ride out the storm... maybe."

"But he wouldn't agree."

"No," Hansell said, dejected. "He wanted the exposure, hoping one of the nationals would come in for the story. He said he had a lot riding on it and my position... our contracts might be, what did he call it..." Hansell's brow furrowed, "... collateral damage. He was so blasé, so matter of fact. You know, I think he took some perverse kind of pleasure in it. I'd spoken

to him before on several occasions and he always struck me as a professional, not like one of these gutter-press tabloid journalists digging up dirt, true or not. But this time... he was different. Probably something to do with the woman."

Tom's eyes narrowed and in the corner of his eye he saw Cassie turn to look at him. He could feel her eyes upon him.

"Woman?" Tom asked.

Hansell screwed up his face. "Yeah. When I got to his place I sat outside for a while. I'm not sure if I was building up the courage to go in or struggling with what I was going to say. Then she came out. He followed, grabbing hold of her arm and pulling her around to face him. He was angry. She was upset."

Tom looked at Cassie and something unsaid passed between them. "Whatever was going on, Gage wasn't happy about it. I should have abandoned the idea there and then, seeing he was in such a foul mood, but... I didn't. She left and I went in."

"And what time was this?" Tom asked.

"Not sure," he said, looking up and thinking hard. "Four-thirty, five o'clock maybe."

"Go on."

Hansell exhaled loudly, scratching at the side of his head. "Not much more to say, really. We talked, he... Gage flatly refused to alter his plans. I don't know what happened... what came over me exactly. Looking back, it was kind of like some sort of out-of-body experience. I felt the anger rising. I've heard that some people describe a red-mist effect coming down, losing control of themselves." He looked at Tom and Cassie in turn, no doubt reading the scepticism in their expressions. "I can't get behind that, I'm afraid. I was there. I was very much present, but it still doesn't feel like it was me. I'm not a violent man, Inspector. Quite the opposite."

"But you picked up a knife," Tom said slowly. "And then you stabbed him with it."

Hansell drew a breath and then rubbed at his mouth and the base of his nose, nodding. "Yes, I did."

"How many times?"

"Three."

The answer was cold, devoid of acknowledgement of the consequences.

"The first surprised me," Hansell said. "The knife was right there. I think he'd used it for preparing lunch as it was lying next to a chopping board. I reached for it and he turned, seeing me standing there holding the knife." His face took on a peculiar expression. Tom wondered if he was recollecting the moment in his mind's eye. "He laughed. He laughed at me... and I stabbed him. The look on his face... shock, horror... and surprise."

"And then?"

Hansell shook his head. "He reached for me and I stepped back. He took a step and I stabbed him again, two more times. I swear he couldn't believe it. Nor could I. Then... he sort of slumped down to the floor and fell forward, breathing out this really odd gurgling sound. I can't describe it any better than that. It was all so surreal."

"And what did you do then?" Tom asked.

"I left, of course. I threw the knife into the marsh before getting into my car. I was surprised how little blood there was. I thought if you stabbed someone, the blood splashes out all over you but it didn't. I mean, I had some on my hands and it took a lot of effort to get it out of the stitching of the leather wrap on my steering wheel, but... as I say, it was a surprise."

"And what of Mary Beckett?" Cassie asked.

Hansell's attention snapped around to her, his brow furrowing with incredulity. "What of her? She was a royal pain in the backside, but I had no reason to kill her. What possible gain would I have?"

"The pain in your backside would be gone," Cassie said.

Hansell laughed. "Everywhere I go in this line of work there are a hundred Mary Becketts. She wasn't any different to all the other protesters who try to block what we do. With her out of the way, it just leaves space for another... and another. Besides," he said with a dismissive flick of the hand. "She'd already succeeded in delaying the project, in having it re-examined by the planning inspectors. What else could she do? I mean really, what would I have to gain from killing her? I know it's hard for you to believe bearing in mind everything I just told you but..." He shook his head. "I didn't kill Mary Beckett. I had nothing to do with it!"

Someone knocked on the door. Tom checked his irritation, not quite able to believe they were being interrupted at this point. He indicated towards the recorder and rose from his seat. Cassie declared DI Janssen was leaving the room along with the time. Tom slipped out into the corridor to

find Eric waiting for him, nervously shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"Sorry, Tom, but you really need to see this."

He thrust a sheet of paper into his hands. Tom lowered his eyes from Eric to the document. It was a list of telephone numbers. Several had repeated entries and were highlighted in different colours. One number stood out.

"Is this what I think it is?" he asked. Eric nodded. "Well, I'll be damned."

"I checked Hansell's contacts list. The number is there but with no name beside it. It's down as *Weekend*."

Tom winked at Eric who smiled, grateful to not feel the wrath of his boss for interrupting the confession. Tom returned to the interview room, Cassie stating that for the sake of the recording. He walked to the table and put the sheet of paper down, pushing it across in front of him. Hansell's eyes drifted to it, but he said nothing.

"This is an itemised call list for your mobile phone account. This telephone number, highlighted in yellow. Whose is it?" Tom asked. Cassie glanced at him, clearly intrigued. Liam Hansell cast an eye over the document once more, sucking his lower lip beneath the upper. His eyes lifted to Tom.

"I see no relevance—"

"Let me be the judge of that. Whose number is it and why don't you have a name registered alongside it in the contacts book of your phone?"

Hansell frowned. "It's... a friend. I see him occasionally."

"A friend called *Weekend*?"

Hansell sighed again, shaking his head. "Look, I work away a lot. My husband and I... we have an agreement that we can... explore other interests while we are apart. It's nothing untoward, as long as we are careful then it's okay. But I see no reason to rub his face in it." He shook his head again, splaying his hands wide. "It's a purely casual arrangement, on everyone's behalf."

"So why no name?"

"Because..." Hansell sat back, looking up and away from them. "Because he's married... and because I am discreet."

"And who is it?"

Hansell fixed his eye on Tom, clearly mulling over what to say next. "I may well have ruined my life, Inspector, but I assure you I will not ruin his." He rubbed at his face with both hands. Lowering them back to the table, he smiled weakly at Tom. "I would like to speak with a solicitor now if I may? I believe it is within my rights."

"This is a murder investigation, Mr Hansell. You may not be doing yourself any favours by not telling us."

Hansell sighed. "I'll take the advice of legal counsel before I say anything else."

He folded his arms across his chest. Tom glanced at Cassie and she concluded the interview.

---

WITH LIAM HANSELL safely detained in a holding cell back in the custody suite, Tom and Cassie joined Eric and Tamara in the ops room. Tom clapped Eric on the shoulder as he came alongside him. Eric grinned. "Outstanding bit of observation, young man," Tom said, looking at the information board relating to Mary Beckett's murder and scanning the recorded details of her alleged stalker and the associated allegations of harassment. The messages sent to her from the anonymous burner phone were untraceable, with no leads as to who sent them. Until now. Now they had a lead, and whoever still had the mobile phone met infrequently with Liam Hansell. They were close. He could feel it.

"But, if Hansell won't speak," Tamara said, "we're no closer to knowing whose number it is, are we?" Her eyes passed between them.

"My money's on Daniel Crowe," Eric said. "There was that incident Janet Beckett relayed to you, Tom, remember?" Tamara looked at Tom inquisitively, but he was lost in thought. Eric explained. "There was an allegation that Crowe was found in a compromising position in his car with a young man. And his loathing of Mary Beckett is no secret."

Tamara raised her eyebrows. "Any truth in that, the compromising position I mean?"

"Yes," Eric said. "He was given a police caution for solicitation at the time. It was five years ago, but timing isn't really relevant when it comes to sexual orientation is it."



"I guess not," Tamara said. She looked at Tom, who was still distracted. "Perhaps Hansell's solicitor will advise him to cooperate, but I'd rather we didn't have to wait to see if that happens."

"I get that I was way off when looking at Alice," Cassie said, her eyes darting towards Tom as she spoke, who barely registered a flicker of a reaction at her admission. "But if she left as the witness and now Hansell clearly state, why did she go back later where she was seen by the manager of the holiday lets?"

"He didn't see her though," Tamara said. "Just her car but I agree, it's odd."

"She didn't go back," Tom said without taking his eyes from the board. "After I left her, she went to collect Saffy from her mum's place. She was also home when I got back later on. She couldn't have been in Cley."

"Yeah, right," Cassie said, frowning. "Like I say, it's odd. I guess the witness made a mistake."

"It happens," Tamara said. "What's on your mind, Tom?"

He looked at her, thumb and forefinger stroking his chin, then at the other two standing either side of him. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"What's on your mind?" she repeated. "Are you with Eric on this, looking at Crowe?"

"I think I have it," he said quietly, meeting her gaze.

"Who?"

Tom shook his head, cutting a wry smile. "It's so obvious when you think about it but now... now I need to prove it."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

---

PULLING UP OUTSIDE THE BECKETTS' family home, Tom was pleased to see Justin Howell, Janet Beckett's son, had already arrived. He'd called ahead, letting them know of developments in the investigation ahead of any press release going out. The media frenzy was about to get underway with the news of Liam Hansell's arrest and charging in the Gage murder. The close association between Prometheus Energy and Mary Beckett's activism would likely send the rumour mill into overdrive. Rain was steadily falling, the day dreary and overcast. The setting matched his mood.

Aware that he should be feeling a measure of elation at obtaining a confession from Liam Hansell, not least to clear Alice of suspicion once and for all, he was left with the opposite feeling. The murder was broadly senseless. If the situation had happened on another day, perhaps even several hours earlier or later, Hansell may not have reacted the way he did. He hadn't gone to see Gage with murder in mind. He was feeling desperate, certainly. He feared for his business and his career, neither of which were justifiable reasons for homicide, but the combination of factors came together along with Gage's ambivalence to his plight as something of a perfect storm. Had Alice not cast Adrian aside that day, maybe he would have been open to Hansell's plea. It was a real sliding doors moment. One with the direst of outcomes.

Now they were left with Mary Beckett's murder. He glanced at Cassie sitting alongside him.

"Ready?"

"Always," she said with a smile. "When should I give Tamara the nod?"

"As soon as we're inside."

They hurriedly approached the front door to escape the rain, and it opened before they reached the porch. Justin Howell welcomed them with a broad smile.

"Do come in, Inspector," he said, stepping aside and beckoning the two of them to enter.

Justin guided them through to the sitting room where Janet Beckett sat before a roaring fire. Suddenly Tom felt uncomfortably warm. Open fires in June were unusual, but the house was large and very old. No doubt the draughts could be felt, particularly on wet and windy days as this one. He undid his coat. Justin stepped forward to take it from him. He laid it flat on an occasional chair, encouraging Cassie to do the same with hers as she tapped something into her mobile phone. She smiled gratefully, slipping her mobile into her pocket.

"I'm sorry," Justin said, indicating the fireplace, "but my mother feels the cold. Even in June."

"It's not June, silly boy," Janet said, shaking her head. "Look out there." She gestured towards the bay window. "Autumn if ever it was."

Her son inclined his head, offering Tom an almost imperceptible shake of the head to imply it wasn't worth arguing the point.

"So, you've made headway in the case I understand?" Justin said, sitting down next to his mother. "Have you arrested someone?"

"I believe an arrest is imminent, yes," Tom said.

"Oh, I see," Justin replied, his brow furrowing in confusion. "I thought you said on the telephone you'd already made an arrest."

"I'm sorry for the misunderstanding. We have, only it was in another murder case."

"The man in Cley?" Justin said, his eyes flicking to his mother.

Tom nodded. "That's correct. A man by the name of Liam Hansell has confessed to the murder."

"The man from the renewable company?" Janet asked. Tom nodded and she casually tapped a finger against the back of her son's hand. "You see, I told you he was a wrong-un."

Justin didn't respond to her, seemingly ignoring her comment. Instead, he focussed on Tom. "But... only to the murder in Cley?"

"Correct."

"And... do you think he was involved in Aunt Mary's death?"

"No, we don't believe so," Tom said. Janet appeared puzzled; Justin more wary.

"Then... pardon me," Justin said, "but what is the development you wished to tell us about?"

Tom sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I'm afraid we're talking at cross purposes again. We're looking to resolve a few things in our timeline that will probably lead to understanding just what happened to Mary."

Janet exchanged a glance with her son. Justin spread his hands wide. "Whatever we can do to help, obviously."

"Great," Tom said. "First off, can you clarify your movements on the night your aunt's body was found out at Blakeney Point?"

Justin's eyes widened and he looked between Tom and Cassie, then at his mother, who appeared just as puzzled.

"On the night she was found?"

Tom nodded. "Yes. After I visited the scene, I came here to speak with your mother. You arrived shortly after, as I recall."

Justin sat open-mouthed, his eyes drifting up to the ceiling. "Yes. I think that was right. But I don't really see—"

"Just bear with me, if you don't mind."

"Okay," Justin said, taking a deep breath and sitting upright. "I... was at home, I believe, when I got the call. I hurried over as soon as I could. Why?"

"That's interesting. I was out at the crime scene with the forensic officers until late in the evening. My colleagues had already visited your mother to notify her of the discovery." Tom indicated Janet, sitting alongside her son with her hands clasped tightly together in her lap. "A family liaison officer was also already in place, well before I arrived here that night. And yet, you were not here. Why did it take you so long to attend?"

Justin shifted in his seat, his frown deepening. "I don't recall. But, as I said, I was at home and I have a life, Inspector. I can't be the only person who isn't immediately available when a call comes in. I came over as soon as I could."

"Fair enough," Tom said, smiling. "No doubt your wife, Miriam isn't it, will be able to confirm that?"

"I... I'm sure—"

"Good, I'm sure DCI Greave will be asking her that very question as we speak."

"What... you are at my home?"

"Oh, yes. Those developments we were talking about, but I'll come to that. I'd really like to know what your car was doing parked at the old harbour in Cley that night? A red Volkswagen Golf, isn't it?"

"Yes. Yes, it is."

"Bought locally?" Tom asked. Justin nodded, confused. "Thought so. It's interesting that car dealers receive a block of registration numbers for their new batch of vehicles, meaning the number plates not only start with the same regional prefix but the rest of the index can be very similar to others arriving on the road at the same time. There will be a number of Volkswagens with similar plates hitting the road simultaneously." Tom glanced at Cassie, inclining his head. "Meaning people can easily get confused when they see the same model of car in the same place on the same day but, crucially, with a slightly different range of letters and numbers. If it's dark and you're busy... it's an easy mistake to make." He could tell Cassie was suppressing a smile.

Justin scoffed. "But... why on earth would you think I was in Cley that night?"

"To see what we were doing out at Blakeney Point," Tom said, fixing him with a stare. "It must have come as quite a shock when you heard a body had been found at the entrance to the harbour. You must have thought your aunt's body was well out into the North Sea by then, seeing as you dropped her body in the water the previous night."

Justin met Tom's stare. "This is absurd—"

"No, it's quite logical when you break it down."

"This is preposterous! What possible motive could I have for doing such a thing?"

"One of the classic motivations that leads to murder, Mr Howell – money. You said it yourself the night we first met; your family have always been very traditional in their outlook whether in regard to relationships or inheritance. As the eldest born child, Mary inherited the family estate. Your mother was welcomed back into the family home by her sister, your aunt, otherwise she would have been destitute." Tom looked at Janet who stared down, fumbling with her fingers in her lap. "With Mary approaching her later years and suffering with terminal cancer - an illness that neither of you

saw fit to mention to us - unmarried and childless, I wonder when you began to think about where her wealth would go when she passed away?" He looked around. "I understand she wasn't necessarily cash rich, but the house and surrounding land would be valuable. Who would that pass to when she died? I'm sure once we've located her will, then we'll know. Because she had a will, didn't she, Mr Howell? That's why you tore her study apart the day after her disappearance looking for it."

Justin leapt to his feet, startling both Tom and Cassie, but he didn't advance on them. Instead, he stood with his arms at his side, fists clenched. "This is an outrage—"

"Sit down, Mr Howell!" Tom said firmly. Justin looked down at his mother, who raised a hand and gently encouraged him to do so. Tom looked between mother and son. "I imagine you both knew what was in the will, or at least you had a good idea. We've been examining your aunt's activities very closely and it's clear she was dedicated to her passion, the natural world—"

"That was all she cared about," Janet said, interrupting him, the first words she'd spoken since they'd sat down. "Not me, the family or this place," she said, absently indicating the house with a flick of the hand and shaking her head. "The place is falling down around us but she didn't care. Just the birds... always the birds."

"And she planned to do what?" Tom asked. "Leave her estate to wildlife charities? You may as well tell me because you didn't find the copy of her will. We'll canvass the local solicitors and I dare say one will have it lodged with them for safety. Were you concerned Mary would leave you and your son with nothing?"

"I don't see how killing my aunt would change the nature of her will, Inspector," Justin said with obvious disdain for the suggestion. "I know you are the professional detective here, but you're barking up the wrong tree."

"No, you're right. Killing Mary wouldn't change what was in her will—"

Justin shook his head in disbelief. "So why on earth would you think that I did?"

"You didn't, Mr Howell..." Tom said, turning his attention to Janet, "did he, Janet?"

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

---

JANET BECKETT WAS AVOIDING Tom's gaze, still fiddling nervously with her hands. Justin reached out and covered her hands with his right. Her eyes darted up at her son, but she didn't speak.

"Now you just hold on a minute," Justin said, glaring at Tom.

"But you did dispose of the body," Tom countered. "When your mother called you to tell you what she'd done, you came out here and retrieved your aunt's body. Then you wrapped it in a shawl she owned and drove out to Blakeney where you either have a boat, or access to someone else's, and you dropped her in the harbour fully anticipating the tide would draw her out into the sea. She would never be found. And no one would ever know what either of you did that night."

Justin exaggerated his exhale. "That's a rather fanciful story, Inspector. I do hope you have something to back it up, otherwise I will be making a complaint to your superior officer."

"I'll get to that, don't worry," Tom said. "But no one sneaked up on Mary. She wasn't assaulted from behind. She was struck once, and she was facing whoever did it. There were no indications of a struggle, no defensive wounds, and we don't believe she was out doing her rounds in her role as a volunteer 'Watcher' of the wildlife reserves. She wasn't properly dressed for it. We believe she was here, at home, in a place where she felt comfortable and safe. Now that only leaves you, Janet. There was no one else here. I put it to you that you argued over what exactly, we don't know. Money, perhaps?" He waited briefly for a reaction. Janet glanced up at him, but away again. "By all accounts, your sister was a spiky character. Was she prone to browbeating you, pointing out how you needed her or were a drain

on the family resources? I don't know but... this time, for whatever reason, you lashed out with whatever was to hand. I doubt you planned to kill her but you did. And then you panicked and called Justin, the same as you always do. And he took it from there. How close am I?"

Justin squeezed his mother's hand firmly. "Say nothing, Mum. The man's lost his marbles."

"But, of course, this was a hastily thrown together plan, but one worthy of congratulation because you almost pulled it off," Tom said. "By disposing of the body in such a way you would have time in which to find a way to counteract Mary's wishes in her last will and testament, while waiting for the years to pass before she could legally be declared dead. And opposing her will was something you'd been working towards for a long time."

"Is that so?" Justin asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Yes, you see this impromptu burial at sea wasn't the original plan, was it? The plan all along was to bring Mary's state of mind into question. The first time we met," he pointed to Justin, "you indicated to me that your aunt suffered from a paranoid delusion regarding someone stalking her. You even suggested that it ran in the family. However, your own mother was positively lucid on that night. But when I came to discuss Liam Hansell's visit and Mary's relationship with Daniel Crowe, Janet seemed to be struggling with her mental acuity. Much as she has exhibited today." He gestured to the weather outside and focussed on Janet again. "Now, either you've experienced a rapid descent in your health or this is all a bit of a show and you've been playing it up for our sakes. The latter would indicate your knowledge and complicity in the plan, Janet."

"I'm getting a little tired of this, Inspector—"

"So am I, Justin. And so was your aunt. The stalking, the late-night prowlers... the harassing phone calls late at night... all designed to not only push Mary to the edge but also to have her question her own sanity."

"So we not only killed her and disposed of the body, but we tried to drive her mad as well. Is that right?"

Tom nodded emphatically. "Yes, that was the plan. What legal grounds are there that can be used to challenge a person's last will and testament? There aren't many. Duress, lack of provision for dependents, fraud and mental incompetence pretty much covers it. Someone spending a decade reporting apparitions following her will do a lot to build a credible case to



challenge the strength of their mental faculties. Having the police effectively instruct her to stop wasting their time must have been music to your ears. All the phone calls, following her and scaring her in the dark... all of it just to sow the seeds of doubt for a later claim against her estate. Thinking about it, if Mary's body was never found and there were no suspicion of foul play, you could even push a theory related to suicide when seeking to have her declared legally dead. The plan was still salvageable, just as long as the murder remained concealed. But there is one thing I don't believe you're aware of."

"And that is?" Justin asked, venom in his tone.

"That you succeeded. Mary went to her GP, concerned about her state of mind, and they ran a battery of tests to see if she was suffering from dementia or any other condition. And you know what? She passed. There was nothing wrong with her state of mind. I'm betting we'll find no evidence of a family disposition to mental health either, but that's for another day."

Tom's mobile rang and he reached into his pocket to retrieve it, all whilst not taking his eye off Justin. He answered without looking at the screen. All four of them sat in silence as Tom listened to the caller. Janet looked up at her son who was agitated but maintained the eye contact with Tom. He was curious as to what was being said, Tom could tell.

"Okay. Thank you," Tom said, hanging up. "Where were we?"

"I'm hoping you're about to offer us some evidence to back up this wild theory of yours, Inspector. Because if not, I think you should leave."

Tom looked at Cassie and winked. "Well, as you know, we arrested and charged Liam Hansell earlier today with the murder of Adrian Gage. During the interview, it became apparent that Mr Hansell was involved in an extra-marital, casual, relationship with another man. A married man. Any idea who that might be, Mr Howell?"

Justin's face drained of colour. His grip on his mother's hand must have changed because she looked at him inquisitively.

"Justin? Do you know?" she asked.

Justin stared at Tom, his lips parting.

"Now, we know it was a discreet affair," Tom said. "Communication was minimal. Judging from the digital records we have obtained from Mr Hansell's mobile phone, it is clear that he arranged these casual meetings via a dating app used by homosexual and bisexual men. There don't appear

to be many profiles in this immediate area and most use pseudonyms, but presumably once people got to know one another they would be more inclined to make arrangements directly rather than through the app. I doubt there are many users of this particular application in this area. In large urban areas, yes, but not so many here. The pool is a lot smaller, so to speak."

Janet was staring at her son now, her eyebrows knitted. "Justin, whatever does he mean?"

Tom continued. "You see, Janet, on my last visit I took your son's reaction to your comments surrounding sexuality to be merely the result of a child's embarrassment. After all, we all have those relatives who make pronouncements that we're uncomfortable with on occasion – the ageing racist uncle at the family wedding or the one member of the family who can't stop talking negatively about immigration in front of your Spanish girlfriend. But it wasn't that, was it, Justin?"

"Tell him he's wrong, Justin," Janet said. She shook his forearm as if to stimulate his defence of the suggestion. Justin's expression didn't change. He averted his gaze from both Tom and his mother. "Justin!" she repeated, shaking him ever more aggressively. He snatched away his arm.

"Mother! For crying out loud, leave me alone."

Janet was shocked, retracting her hand slowly, open-mouthed. Tom shook his head.

"You shouldn't have kept the mobile phone," he said softly. "But I can see why you did. You bought it to harass your aunt. It was untraceable. The police couldn't even find you. So when it came for you to explore yourself more freely, of course you'll return to the anonymity of the prepay phone. If the police couldn't trace it to you no one else would. Not your wife," he said, turning to Janet. "Or your mother. And you should know that the call I received was from Detective Chief Inspector Greave, who is currently searching your home. We have the mobile phone." Janet gasped. "Furthermore, your wife Miriam has openly said she wasn't at home the night we found Mary's body out at Blakeney Point. She was out with two friends for the evening, so you were lying about who you were with, if not where you were."

Justin took a deep breath, chewing on his lower lip. He closed his eyes, steadying himself. "I have nothing more to say."

"That's perfectly okay," Tom said. "You need not say another word as far as I'm concerned. We have enough."

"Those bloody birds!" Janet hissed.

"Mother, please be quiet!"

"No, I won't!" she snapped. "You think you know people, those closest to you and then you find out you don't know them at all."

Justin looked between Tom and his mother, his eyes glazing over as he realised the comment was directed at him. He reached for her hand, but she sharply withdrew it from his reach. "Mother," he said quietly. She ignored his plea.

"Mary with those damn birds... putting them before her own blood... and you," she sneered. "You disgust me."

Tom felt a pang of sympathy for the man opposite, seeing the depth to which the remark cut. It was no wonder he chose to keep his attractions secret from his mother and seeing how positively venomous she could be, it was not such a leap to imagine her lashing out at her sister. Perhaps the sisters were more alike than it at first appeared. Forensics officers would be revisiting the house soon. Whereas before they'd only searched the study, now they would be treating the entire house as a potential murder scene. Mother and son had done well to try to circumnavigate the investigation, almost succeeding, but he was confident that if Mary was killed here, then they would find evidence of it.

He spared a momentary thought about family. That these people could live in and around each other for decades, as close to each other as anyone could be, only to see those relationships undone by the basest of human emotions.

That of greed.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

---

SUMMER FINALLY ARRIVED on the last day of June with a southerly wind drawing a humid weather front up from southern Europe. It seemed fitting that this day, the day Adrian Gage was laid to rest, was bathed in warm sunshine offering the promise of a brighter future than an overcast, dreary experience. Tom heard the service end, but by this point both he and his team had already stepped out of the church. The turnout was high, making the interior of the church standing room only with mourners crammed in and even spilling outside where a speaker system had been rigged up so those who couldn't get in could still be a part of the service. Adrian was a popular figure who'd amassed a lot of contacts over the years, contacts who obviously described themselves as friends. This was no mean feat when considering he spent most of his career freelancing, drifting from story to story with no fixed employer.

Evidently he was highly rated both personally and professionally. Tom found himself forced to see the man in a very different light in contrast to the opinion he'd held for so long. Although Alice had never sought to negatively influence his opinion, as exes often tended to do, he thought Adrian was a lazy parent and likely a terrible husband. After all, the number of times he let his daughter down was unforgivable, no matter what the justification. However, it wasn't as clear cut as that. A lesson learnt following the late-night visit of Carol, Adrian's sister, who explained the distance he put between himself and his family was largely down to keeping them out of harm's way following repeated threats to their safety.

Tom could relate. He would always try to keep both Alice and Saffy safe. But here too was how the two men differed in approach. No matter

what the sacrifice, Tom was certain he would take the necessary steps to make it so, even if that meant sacrificing his career, his passion, to keep them out of harm's way. Adrian didn't, or at least he hadn't until this last investigation. Unable to turn back the clock, because Alice refused, he must have felt adrift as to where he was heading but only for a few minutes as fate saw to it that he need not have to reconsider his plans. Liam Hansell took care of that.

"I'm sorry."

Tom snapped from his reverie, glancing to Cassie standing alongside him. Tamara and Eric had drifted away a few steps and were having their own conversation in hushed tones.

"Sorry, what did you say?"

"I was apologising," she said. "I was so caught up in the theory of Alice as the primary suspect I couldn't see past it."

He shook his head. "Don't worry—"

"Ah... but I do. I figured you were so close to her that your objectivity was compromised by your emotional involvement and... and I dismissed what you were saying. I didn't pay it proper attention."

Tom cut a wry half-smile, his hands in his pockets as they made their way from those gathered outside. "No, you were right," he said, glancing sideways. "I was... am... emotionally attached to the case." He reached out and touched her forearm, bringing them both to a standstill. Tamara looked over at them from where she and Eric were talking. "And my objectivity *was* compromised."

Cassie smiled gratefully.

"But," he said, inclining his head to one side, "let's keep that between us, yeah?" She nodded. "It wouldn't do my reputation any good to be seen as emotional."

"Perish the thought."

They both smiled. People leaving the church saw them turn back to see the family walk out first, led by Carol, Adrian's sister. Her partner walked alongside her, the two of them hand in hand. She was the only direct family Adrian had; their parents having died in recent years. Behind her came Alice. Saffy was in her arms, her legs wrapped around her mother's waist, head buried in her shoulder. Alice managed the weight, which was not insignificant, carrying Saffy with apparent ease. Tom admired how she

managed to do whatever she had to in order to meet her daughter's needs, no matter how much of a challenge it was.

Alice and Carol stepped to one side offering mourners the opportunity to speak with them if they chose to. Alice lowered Saffy to the ground and she looked around, trying to see through the press of people leaving the church. Tom lost sight of her but only for a moment. The mass of curls was visible slipping between the legs of those waiting to pass on their condolences, Saffy making a beeline straight for him. He dropped to his haunches as she ran up to him launching herself into his arms. He hoisted her up as he rose, her arms gripping him tightly. She stared straight into his face, hers barely a hand span from his. She'd been crying, her cheeks were tearstained. She leaned into him without a word and he hugged her tightly. Cassie smiled weakly as he rocked the little girl gently from side to side making soothing sounds.

Mourners made their way past them. Tom knew very few. There was a wake organised at a local golf club, Tom didn't plan to attend unless Alice specifically asked. There were few children present and given the choice he would take Saffy somewhere else. She'd already been through enough today and under normal circumstances he didn't see funerals as a place for children.

Carol Martins approached. He smiled a polite greeting and she returned it, reaching out a hand and softly stroking Saffy's back. Saffy didn't respond, keeping her head resting on Tom's shoulder. Carol met his eye.

"Ade was right about you."

He wasn't sure how he was supposed to respond to that but figured he didn't need to, so instead he nodded and smiled again.

"Thank you," Carol said, placing a hand on his forearm by way of appreciation before moving on.

Alice came alongside, angling her head so she could see Saffy's face. Saffy reached out with one hand and her mother grasped it gently.

"How are you doing, Monkey?"

"Okay," Saffy said, lifting her head away from Tom. She looked into his eyes. "Are you coming home?"

Tom exchanged a quick look with Alice who watched him expectantly. He smiled at Saffy. "Yes, Sweetheart. I'm coming home."

---

The next book in the series;

[Kill Them Cold](#)

Hidden Norfolk - Book 7

Click [here](#) to receive a FREE digital copy of LIFE & DEATH, a Hidden Norfolk novella.

---

Alternatively, visit my website at [www.jmdalgliesh.com](http://www.jmdalgliesh.com) and sign up to my VIP Club and be first to receive news and previews of forthcoming works.

---

Never miss a new release.

No spam, ever, guaranteed. You can unsubscribe at any time.



**Enjoy this book? You could make a real difference.**

Because reviews are critical to the success of an author's career, if you have enjoyed this novel, please do me a massive favour by entering one onto Amazon.

**Yes, I am happy to leave a review - [click here](#)**

Reviews increase visibility. Your help in leaving one would make a massive difference to this author. Thank you for taking the time to read my work.

KILL THEM COLD - PREVIEW

## HIDDEN NORFOLK - BOOK 7

FOR ONCE, it was a relief to escape the chaos. The music, the laughter and the boisterous behaviour, the sound of which, although muted, still carried to her as she walked. The fresh air made her feel dizzy. Had she really drunk that much? The sound of waves in the distance crashing against the beach and insects chirping in the nearby brush was reminiscent of Mediterranean holidays, if not for the lack of dust underfoot she could easily imagine she was in southern France or on a sparsely populated Greek island.

The night was clear; the moon looming large in the sky illuminating the path. A gentle breeze passed over the sea of reeds, whispering to her politely, feeling cool on her skin. Brushing aside the hair clinging to her forehead, still clammy with sweat from the packed pub, she looked back. Movement from within showed the party was in full swing and didn't look like ending anytime soon. Usually, she would be in the thick of it.

But not tonight. She'd had enough.

There were those who would be pleased she'd ducked out early. The jealous ones. Those who smiled sweetly but would actively savage her the moment she turned her back. It wasn't her fault they were being ignored. They should look at themselves in the mirror before shooting daggers in her direction. Men were visual creatures. More so when they drink. Even the intellectual ones, not that they'd admit it if asked.

Men were curious beings, so easy to entertain and so quick to convince themselves of their unique qualities. Despite observing the experience of others, their rise and subsequent fall, when it came to themselves they were convinced that this time would be different. They were different. Therefore

it followed, as their delusions manifested, that the outcome would also be different.

A quick smile, wide-eyed and welcoming. The occasional flirtatious touch. It didn't need to be anywhere intimate, just a casual stroke of the back of a hand or forearm and a pulse of electricity would pass between them. This was usually enough. She felt it too. The promise of excitement. The anticipation of something new, intoxicating and rebellious. Their eyes would follow her around the room for the rest of the evening, pretending not to, watching as she interacted with people and silently hoping she would return and make good on her promise. And it would be different. Of course it would be. Other men didn't possess the same appeal. When she flirted with the others it meant nothing, and when she came back to them it was because they had what she needed. Each man thought he was special. He was the one.

They were all wrong, of course.

The older men were an interesting challenge. Having done a few laps of the track already, they knew the rules of the game far better than the twenty-somethings. Not that they were immune, though. They were easy to draw in, but much harder to convert. They knew better. The risk was greater, for they usually had more to lose than merely a bruising encounter with their pride. But a man's ego can take on its own mischievous character, whispering plausible narratives in otherwise deaf ears.

The attention was nice and all but, contrary to popular belief, it wasn't attention that she craved. She wasn't mistaking male company for the displaced love of her childhood or whatever pop-psychology was thrown at her this time. No, the high came from the feeling of power. The thrill of watching them react to her, male or female, and playing one off against another without making it too obvious. The physical thrill was fun too, most of the time. But she wasn't looking for that tonight.

A stick cracked nearby. She half-turned, expecting to see someone approaching. She waited, watching the bushes intently, listening hard against the backdrop of the sea. A cloud passed in front of the moon, causing a shift in the light, offering new shadows to her overactive imagination. Conscious of holding her breath, she absently toyed with the braid tied around her wrist. Satisfied she was alone, she resumed her walk towards the beach.

Footsteps. She started and spun. This time a figure stepped from the brush alongside the path. Putting a hand on her chest, she smiled as she took a deep breath.

“Oh, it’s you.” She could hear the relief in her voice. “You startled me.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“That’s... what are you doing out here?”

“I saw you were alone. I thought you might want some company.”

She was on edge. The clandestine approach. The casual words. The easy smile. She felt her own smile fading as she looked back to the pub, a beacon of light amid the houses in darkness dotted around nearby.

“No... no, I don’t,” she said, hesitantly. This offer wasn’t on her terms. For once, she felt out of control. “I wanted to be alone for a bit.”

“Really? Who wants to be alone?”

She backed up, trying to put some space between them, registering a change in demeanour. It didn’t work. Her instincts asserted themselves, screaming at her internally, and she turned, thinking to run only to catch her footing and stumble. Putting out a hand to break her fall, she still hit the ground hard. She may feel like she’d sobered up, but clearly her body disagreed. A figure appeared over her as the clouds cleared and they were bathed in silver light.

“Here, let me help you.”

A hand was extended to her, and reluctantly she reached up and took it. Rising to her feet, she dusted herself down.

“Thanks. I... I don’t know what happened there.”

The smell of cigarette smoke was dominant, overpowering that of beer. They were close to one another, closer than she would like.

“So, do you want some company?”

She shook her head almost imperceptibly. “No, thank you. I’d rather be alone tonight.”

“No one wants to be alone.”

---

The next book in the series;

[Kill Them Cold](#)

## Hidden Norfolk - Book 7

## **The Hidden Norfolk Series**

[One Lost Soul](#)

[Bury Your Past](#)

[Kill Our Sins](#)

[Tell No Tales](#)

[Hear No Evil](#)

[Life and Death](#)\*

\*FREE eBook - A Hidden Norfolk novella

## **The Dark Yorkshire Series**

[Divided House](#)

[Blacklight](#)

[The Dogs in the Street](#)

[Blood Money](#)

[Fear the Past](#)

[The Sixth Precept](#)

## **The Dark Yorkshire Box Sets**

[Dark Yorkshire Books 1-3](#)

[Dark Yorkshire Books 4-6](#)

## **Audiobooks**

The entire Dark Yorkshire series is available in audio format, read by the award-winning Greg Patmore.

**[Divided House](#)**

**[Blacklight](#)**

**[The Dogs in the street](#)**

**[Blood Money](#)**

**[Fear the Past](#)**

**[The Sixth Precept](#)**



## **Audiobook Box Sets**

**[Dark Yorkshire Books 1-3](#)**

**[Dark Yorkshire Books 4-6](#)**

\*Hidden Norfolk audiobooks arriving 2020